The Incredible Nineteenth Century: Science Fiction, Fantasy, and Fairy Tale

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About *I19*

The Incredible Nineteenth Century: Science Fiction, Fantasy, and Fairy Tale (*I19*) seeks to publish the finest scholarship on the century that was, in many ways, the time period in which the modern genres of science fiction and fantasy began, and in which the academic study of fairy tale and folklore has its roots. *I19* interprets "the nineteenth century" broadly, using the dates of "The Long Nineteenth Century"—roughly, from the beginning of the French Revolution to the end of World War I—but even these dates are just notable historical markers as they approximately coincide with Romanticism and Modernism, respectively. Scholarship on works from the eighteenth century that anticipated or influenced writers in the nineteenth century or ways in which nineteenth-century literature influenced later authors both fall within the interests of this journal. *I19* also publishes scholarship on Neo-Victorianism, Steam Punk, or any other contemporary genres that react to the time periods contained within The Long Nineteenth Century. Genres such as horror and mystery, though not strictly within the realms of the fantastic, are also welcome, due to their close affinity with science fiction and fantasy. Scholarship on early film is also welcome. Additionally, *I19* is dedicated to maintaining a scope that is both multicultural and global, and we encourages submissions on works from marginalized communities and from around the world.

In addition to literary scholarship, *I19* also publishes works on pedagogy. These pieces may be personal reflections, strategies on course design, innovative assignment sheets with commentary, or anything else that educators teaching nineteenth-century literature may find useful.

Finally, *I19* maintains robust Book Reviews and Media Reviews sections. Book reviews cover a wide array of recent scholarly works, and media reviews cover film, television, video games, and any other form of mass media.

Queries and submissions may be sent to i19@mtsu.edu. We accept submissions on a rolling basis, and there are no author fees. Generative AI may not be used to produce text.

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From the Editor

"'Born bad': A Past and Present Ideology

James Hamby

"Born bad" is the constant refrain of Toby Veck, the protagonist of Charles Dickens's second Christmas book, *The Chimes* (1844). Toby, himself a poor man, has bought into the ruling elites' propaganda that the poor are born irredeemably bad—lazy, criminal, uncaring, and negligent. Throughout the story, Toby takes the criticisms of his social superiors (specifically Alderman Cute and Sir Joseph Bowley) to heart, lamenting that he and his beloved daughter are only contributing to social deterioration. The social elites cling to "Young England" ideology—a conservative belief that things were better in the Middle Ages when local gentry, rather than centralized government, cared for the needs of their dependents. Of course, in typical Dickensian fashion, the rich and powerful prove themselves to be self-interested hypocrites and the true degenerates of the story. The spirits of this tale criticize Toby for rejecting the social progress of his time and for supporting a social ideology whose day was long past, and whose reality never quite matched the rosy vision that nostalgia had painted of it. The Young England movement—today we might call it "Make England Great Again"—was simply a self-serving ideology promoted by the wealthy to oppose progressive governance and to keep working people poor and powerless.

One hundred and eighty years later, elites are still telling the poor and downtrodden the same thing: "You were born bad." Do you need assistance for food, housing, or health care? Bad. Do you send your kids to public school? Bad. Did you come to this country looking for work? Bad. This past year saw a billionaire president and his even wealthier henchman lay off hundreds of thousands of government employees so that the rich could pay less in taxes. That same president

initiated several rounds of ill-conceived tariffs that have severely strained household budgets and then claimed that the affordability crisis is a "hoax." Though nearly two centuries have passed, elites are still pushing the same narrative: the poor lack money because they are born bad. It is surprising to see such close similarities between the anti-progressive rhetoric of the 1840s and now, but what is even more shocking is that, like Toby Veck, so many American voters buy into this propaganda against their own interests. It is a testament to the seductive nature of an ideology that condemns the "bad" nature of individuals rather than criticizing the systemic nature of oppression.

Like so many other fantasy authors of the past two centuries, Dickens wrapped his social reform narratives in supernatural trappings. In both *The Chimes* and *A Christmas Carol* (1843), Dickens uses the unseen spiritual world as a check against the powerful forces of the mortal world, with its vested interests, monopolies, and robber barons of immense wealth and power. In the real world, of course, these powers were fought by unions, progressive legislation, and millions of working-class activists for generations. Now, especially in the past decade, we have seen the world they fought for erode and give way to a nineteenth-century worldview that would be smiled upon by Alderman Cute.

It is no coincidence that science fiction and fantasy (at least in the sense that we know them) evolved around the advent of the Industrial Revolution. Humanity was facing a much-altered world, and we needed new stories to define our humanity against the social and technological changes. As we begin the second quarter of the twenty-first century, we find ourselves in a similar predicament. AI forces us to ask what is the worth of human experiences and emotions, and do such things have a chance when pitted against a tech economy, unregulated and driven by greed? Will the decline of democracy continue to the point where we are ruled by robber barons intent on

stripping away our rights and making us nothing more than cogs in their money-making machinery (or perhaps not even that, since AI threatens so many jobs)?

Had Toby Veck not rejected "born bad" ideology, he would have prevented his daughter's betrothal to her sweetheart, causing tragic results for his family. Likewise, if we do not reject today's "born bad" rhetoric, our children will suffer, spending their lives in the dystopian future that we are creating for them. In the generations that came after Dickens's time, the Sir Joseph Bowleys and Alderman Cutes of the world saw their power checked as society rejected *laissez faire* economics, supported workers' rights, and built a basic social safety net. It was of course never perfect, but at least the order that emerged was one built on more humane principles. Now, as we stand at the threshold of another period of profound change in human history, we must once more choose: do we want a world where we view most people as "born bad" and where the wealthy rule over them to keep them in their place, "putting down" their perceived vices, or do we believe in the intrinsic value of each individual human being, and that everyone has the freedom to strive for a better life? Surely nobody who looks at masked ICE agents—jack-booted thugs if there ever were any—jumping out of vans to arrest people on their way to work could see any semblance of a humane world in the policies of this administration. It took the efforts of the spiritual world to convince Toby Veck of the error of his ways; hopefully all it will take for us will be the evidence of our senses.

What Is Dead May Never Die: A Word from the Media Review Editor

Joe Conway

The media review section in this issue of *The Incredible Nineteenth-Century: Science Fiction, Fantasy, and Fairy Tale* includes Stacey Hoffer's reflections on a trio of "cozy puzzle" video games whose play mechanics, storylines, and visuals offer gamers lessons in how gender ideology shaped nineteenth-century botany discourse and intensified the unresolved tension between occult and scientific epistemic habits that dually informed Victorian knowledge of plants. Meanwhile, Safiyya Hosein takes readers beyond the familiar Euro-medieval geography of Westeros to visit the "mysterious" city of Pentos in HBO's series *House of the Dragon* (2022-) that is set in the fantasy universe of George R. R. Martin. Hosein notes how so much of Pentos—its spices, architectural forms, harems, and bloodthirsty warriors—faithfully reproduces orientalist tropes that exoticize non-western bodies and settings that might as well have been cribbed from Richard Burton's illustrated 1885-88 edition of *The Arabian Nights*. In an age when Anglo-American cultural discourse is shaped by a suspiciously Victorian "separate spheres" worldview as propagated by manosphere and tradwife influencers nostalgic for white Christian nationalism, both Hoffer and Hosein add to our understanding of how zombie forms of nineteenth-century thought and representation are both (un)alive and (un)well in the culture industry of twenty-first-century entertainment media.

The seafaring people of Martin's Iron Islands, whose civilization is itself inspired by the same Viking culture adored by anti-Semites like Richard Wagner and his Nazi acolytes, have an absurd but instructive national motto for our sick times: "What is dead may never die." First uttered on television in Martin's incredibly popular HBO series, *Game of Thrones* (2011-19), for which *Dragons* is a prequel, the Iron Islanders' refusal to let what is dead stay dead unintentionally speaks

in the voice of the media ecosystem that birthed it—one flooded by endless iterations of recycled IP, whether mapped inside Martin's Westeros, the Marvel Extended Universe, or Disney's *Star Wars* Galaxy. Perhaps even more appealing to media execs overseeing a monopolized industry whose corporate wars and territorial mergers are the real-life counterparts of those imperial conflicts and conquests chronicled in their increasingly uninteresting shows, are those beloved nineteenth-century characters and narratives whose authors are gloriously just dead enough to demand no royalty checks. These include everything from the many Brontë and Austen adaptations or Greta Gerwig's *Little Women* (2019), to the Stoker-inflected vampire tales and Shelley-bound monster tales taken up, respectively, in the acclaimed films of Hollywood auteurs like Robert Eggers's *Nosferatu* (2024), Ryan Coogler's *Sinners* (2025), Yorgos Lanthimos's *Poor Things* (2023), or Guillermo del Toro's *Frankenstein* (2025). Yes, what is dead may never die, but here at *I19*, we are especially interested in asking a question related to this Iron-born maxim from the specific vantage point of literary and cultural studies scholars trained in the first wave of transatlantic gothic fiction: "Why does the nineteenth century insist on haunting our own?"

Certainly, the twenty-first century media ecosystem we inhabit looks much different than that of writers like the Brontës, Austen, Shelley, Alcott, and Stoker, as this review section surveys a world of cinema, streaming services, and video games that constitute the main diet of eager post-literate consumers. *I19* will continue to publish reviews that demonstrate the afterlife of that previous world as it bears on our own, but in the issues to follow this one, as the editor of our Media Review section, I will also offer a series of short essays on certain nineteenth-century narrative materials whose residual remains continue to structure the production of contemporary cultural forms. In particular, I will focus on a trend most evident in a popular genre that itself has been pronounced dead many times, only to see itself resurrected before our eyes on a variety of

media platforms: the situation comedy. In the past decade shows like BBC One's *Ghosts* (2019-23), later repurposed with the same title for American audiences on NBC (2021-), has joined with others like Amazon Prime's *Upload* (2020-25) and NBC's *The Good Place* (2016-20) to participate in a Victorian tradition of spiritualist fiction where the dead and the living communicate with one another to seek the latter's emotional closure in this world and the former's in a world beyond. Bringing new narrative perspective from the point of view of the colonized, FX's *Reservation Dogs* (2021-23) and its Indigenous production team led by Seminole showrunner Sterlin Harjo have created a contemporary portrait of Native American life in Oklahoma that prominently features a spirit guide to several characters who died fighting Custer's army at the Battle of Little Big Horn. And finally, FX's other towering contribution to the sitcom tradition, *What We Do in the Shadows* (2019-24), as overseen by its showrunner, the Jewish- and Maori-identifying cocreator of *Reservation Dogs,* Taika Waititi, marshals a whole bestiary of nineteenth-century monsters—vampires, reanimated creatures, and rapping spirits, to name a few—to tell what is at its core a story of immigrants to America from the Middle East, Europe, and Mexico as they attempt to resist assimilation into a dominant culture exemplified by their blindingly white "emotional vampire" housemate named Colin Robinson. One of the leads, a medieval Ottoman general-turned-vampire named Nandor the Relentless (played by Persian-English comedian Kayvan Novak) offers one of the more fully rounded depictions of a Middle Eastern character ever to appear on American television. And *Shadows*' setting of Staten Island, forever positioned as the "other" NYC borough, is depicted like a real place in a way that *Dragons*' Pentos is most certainly not.

Sianne Ngai has argued convincingly that the sitcom form as codified by *I Love Lucy* (1951-57) and its domestic housewife with frustrated dreams, constitutes the supreme narrative

expression of the post-WWII "American Century" and effectively served that hegemonic cultural role that the realist novel played in the age of British imperial hegemony. And from *I Love Lucy* forward the sitcom has primarily centered on a realist domestic setting, whether the living room presided over by patriarchs like Archie Bunker in *All in the Family* (1971-79) and Cliff Huxtable in *The Cosby Show* (1984-92) or the decentered apartment spaces favored by the aimless protagonists of *Friends* (1994-2004) and *Seinfeld* (1989-98). Occasionally a *Munsters* (1964-66) or an *I Dream of Genie* (1965-70) might add some gothic or magic twist on the formula, but even these narratives were largely focused on middle-class family units. What characterizes the afterlife sitcom as I understand it, however, is that it centers alternate forms of sociality to the bourgeois family unit in the manner of *Seinfeld* and *Friends* while eschewing the ideal of heterosexual marriage or romance as the only proper end of a person's life. These are sitcoms with forging a new collective identity on their minds: the transhistorical assembly of ghosts representing different yet simultaneously existing eras of British or American history in *Ghosts*; a multicultural and global cohort of the recently dead working towards enlightenment in *The Good Place*; the group of childhood friends who identify as "rez dogs" and seek both their own place in the world where they can live as Native Americans with roots in western modernity as well as their ancestral past as kept alive by the nineteenth-century spirit of William Knifeman; and the polyamorous polycule of Old World vampires and their Mexican-American familiar, Guillermo de la Cruz, who eschew mainstream American culture for the queer comforts of Staten Island home life in *What We Do in the Shadows*.

If the classic sitcom form told a story of conventional middle-class family life whose health and happiness ensured the health and happiness of a newly supreme USA, the afterlife sitcom produced in the twilight of the American Century is one that turns away from realism and toward

a gothic form of storytelling better suited to tell stories about the world once ruled over by Huxtables, Bunkers, and Bings that has already passed into the history books. Please stay tuned in the coming issues, where alongside future reviews of films like *Sinners* and *Frankenstein*, these pages will focus on some aspects of the contemporary afterlife sitcom and its relation to nineteenth-century narrative traditions. Collectively, this critic hopes these readings can help in performing a much-needed cultural autopsy of the present.

Article

Ragnhild Jølsen's "Det Forbandede Ord": A Fairy Tale of Light and Darkness in Female Desire

Lisa Yamasaki

Norwegian author Ragnhild Jølsen wrote compelling novels, yet her last collection of short stories in *Efterlatte Arbeider* [*Later Work*] reveals her artistry through her shorter works and literary fragments. In *Efterlatte Arbeider*, Jølsen crafts a fairy tale, "Det Forbandede Ord" ["The Forbidden Word"], that tells of a woman gifted with the ability to perceive the darkest evil and the purest beauty in nature, a gift that propels her into exploring the mysteries of nature and creation. Because "Den Forbandede Ord" was uncovered after Jølsen's death and was most likely unedited, many English-speaking readers have not read it, let alone analyzed it. Given a cursory glance, most readers would understand this story as a mere cautionary tale that warns women against acting on their curiosity about strange men. Due to Jølsen's nonconformity in her lifestyle and form of expression, however, I interpret Jølsen's story as one of female empowerment, one that portrays the light and darkness in women's experiences in the form of a folk tale to assert women's resilience.

Ragnhild Jølsen's Life

Jølsen's early life influenced the role of nature and the unconventional portrayal of women in her fiction. Jølsen was born in 1875 in the outer parts of Enebakk on a farm, but she later moved to Kristiania (present-day Oslo) when her father became bankrupt. At an early age, Jølsen expressed her thoughts on both the happiness and darkness in life in her diary, and she spent much of her free time wandering the city sights, even though it displeased her parents. When she was

twenty-one, her family moved back to Enebakk after her father once again became bankrupt and lost his ownership of a match factory (Simut 62), and she began to focus her writing on combining folk tradition with fairy tales and legends with a feminist perspective. According to literary historian and teacher Antoine Tiberg, Jølsen wandered for hours by herself in the forests near her ancestral farm. She wanted to learn all about humans and monsters, and she wished to encounter and challenge invisible creatures in the forest and gain mastery over them. "Det Forbandede Ord" captures her interest in the forest and its secrets as well as her experience of getting lost in the woods for days, an event that caused alarm and prompted people to come looking for her (Tiberg 32-33).

Though she lived a short life, Jølsen published a handful of novels and two short story collections. Between 1903 and 1907, Jølsen published her novels *Ve's Mor* (1903), *Rikka Gan* (1904), *Fernanda Mona* (1905), and *Hollases Krønike* (1906), as well as her short story collection, *Brukshistorier* (1907). In 1908, Jølsen died by overdosing on sleeping powders, and Tiberg found her last collection, *Efterladte Arbeid* (sometimes termed *Efterlatte Tekster*) in one of her drawers and published it (Fæhn 10-11). In all of her writing, whether fully developed novels or sketches of short stories, Jølsen incorporated different literary influences and aspects of folk and fairy tales in her work to portray the light and the darkness of women's experiences.

Critics have identified various examples of such polarities throughout Jølsen's work, a point that helps contextualize "Det Forbandede Ord." In Gisella Brouwer-Turci and Henk A. van der Liet's assessment of *Rikka Gan*, they observe that the farm setting becomes mysterious during the night, as it is filled with family histories and memories. Furthermore, Jølsen characterizes the two main female characters, Rikka and Fernanda, as "two women, one dark and one light" (Brouwer-Turci and van der Liet 56). This description not only foreshadows the strong female

characters but also hints at their fates. Ramona Simut observes that Jølsen's novel, *Ve's Mor*, includes a love triangle and emphasizes a mother's sexual drives that cause a psychological breakdown and the birth of a mentally disturbed child (62). Janet Garton describes *Fernanda Mona* as a continuation of Rikka's story, where the titular character struggles with similar issues as her aunt, Rikka. Having to maintain order in her wild household, Fernanda suffers between the need for financial survival and her own desires (76). In all her novels, Jølsen depicts a woman's need to express her erotic desires even though such bliss is short-lived.

Despite Jølsen's short life, critics praised her expressive qualities and strong depiction of emotional endurance. In *Illustreret Norsk Littteraturhistorie Siste Tidsrum 1890-1904* (1905), Norwegian critic Carl Nærup briefly discusses her work, as she had just published *Rikka Gan*. He aptly describes her passionate tone and states that her work possesses "rødere Blod og kraftigere Puls i hendes Prosa" [redder blood and a stronger pulse in her prose], further elaborating that Jølsen has "den same Natursyn paa Menneksene og det menneskelige, den same dunkle og dybtsøgende Mystik" [the same natural view of people and the human, the same dark and deeply searching mystery] (265). Unlike Nærup's assessment, other critics assumed her writing was a man's due to her depiction of erotic details, yet her ability to weave in elements from nature and attribute them to positive qualities in women reflects a fresh perspective on women's experiences outside of the moral ideal of marriage.

Jølsen admired Hans E. Kinck's method of incorporating psychological issues in his writing, and it inspired her to send him her first manuscript. Though he found the work fragmentary, he did appreciate its "trembling intensity … and great talent behind the feverish words" (Jorgenson 430). "Den Forbandede Ord," a story that explores the light and darkness of women's lives, utilizes a fairy-tale narrative to create social commentary on the need to use

literature to highlight women's experiences. Written in 1907, this short story highlights some of the norms of relationships between men and women, yet it asserts women's right to explore their erotic nature, though this story does not overtly portray a sexual encounter. During this time, Norwegian women gained more social and political rights and participated in literary culture by infusing aspects of the supernatural into their lived perspectives. Literary convention at the time incorporated gothic themes and the supernatural to exhibit psychological depth. In this story, the forbidden bond between the unnamed protagonist and the legendary Guldmanden [the Golden Man] constitutes her encounter with the sublime, a recurring theme in gothic literature. The protagonist meets the supernatural Guldmanden, who controls the nettle bushes, the mountains, and the flow of the rivers, and who ensnares her into a romantic commitment with him. She experiences terror when she first meets Guldmanden after wandering in the forest, yet this fear dissipates after their first meeting. Through her abilities to perceive both the terrifying and the beautiful, she experiences visions of the wonders of nature in addition to a love affair with him, though the narrator only hints at this affair by referring to the protagonist's decision to love him. Despite not being clear on the nature of Guldmanden, the narrator suggests that he bears a nefarious nature as he forbids the protagonist entry into a benevolent god's kingdom. While this predicament may suggest a tragic ending in the woman's life, Jølsen concludes her fairy story with the protagonist seeking advice from a mystical woman in the woods who tells her of women's advantage over men. According to the mystical character, women rise over men's issues and often find their solutions in life intuitively due to the nature of being women. Offering this mystical woman's advice as the story's conclusion, Jølsen emphasizes the balance between the light character (the mystical woman) and dark character (Guldmanden) to assert that female empowerment entails an acceptance of both factors.

Situating Jølsen's work in the Aftermath of the Modern Breakthrough

"Den Forbandede Ord" encompasses aspects of the Scandinavian Gothic and Jugendstil, typically found in the literature of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century. While her writing conveys aspects of Norwegian Neoromanticism, a subsection of literary culture that heavily emphasizes the supreme power of nature, Jølsen additionally incorporates gothic traits into her story. Describing the gothic tradition as a malleable genre with features such as tragic heroines, daunting settings, and hyperbolic plot designs, Kirstine Katsbjerg distinguishes the Danish gothic tradition as upholding a more subtle form of the sublime (13). The sublime entails an encounter with the fantastic at a safe distance, thus causing a thrill within the spectator. Scandinavian writers represented the sublime through psychological conflict until the Modern Breakthrough[1] (Katsbjerg 20). Although Katsbjerg mentions that the leading Danish literary critic, Georg Brandes, admonished both gothic trends and Romanticism, some writers during this time period hid their supernatural impulses in metaphors, as in the works of Norwegian playwright Henrik Ibsen and Swedish writer August Strindberg. For Brandes, the aim of literature was to instruct readers, as he claimed that effective literature "increase[s] our knowledge, divest[s] ourselves of prejudices, and in an ever greater degree become[s] personalities" (62-63). His claim corresponds to the trend in literature that placed emphasis on representing social issues, such as debates about double standards for men and women in marriage, female sexual drive, women's emancipation, and prostitution (Brouwer-Turci and van der Liet 37). Yet, some Norwegian writers such as Jølsen, Tryggve Andersen, and Sigurd Mathisen went against the literary trends of their time and revitalized supernatural aspects such as gothic elements. Paula Ryggvik Mikalsen states that in

[1] The Modern Breakthrough was a literary movement from the 1870s to 1890s that focused on Naturalism and critiqued social and gender roles, as opposed to the preceding movement, Romanticism.

their works, "the characters and narrators became more unreliable, and the borders of the individual were more fluid, to the point of dissolving into the supernatural events" (24).

During the Modern Breakthrough, critical examination of social issues caused some writers to incorporate Romantic ideals back into their stories using realistic depictions of the supernatural. In her article "Flora of the Human Mind," Astrid Lorenz argues that Jølsen demonstrates a literary version of the visual Jugendstil aesthetic[2] that was popular in the mid-1890s until around 1905. Lorenz observes that this movement, like the Romantic and Neo-Romantic, emphasized artistic creativity and served as a reaction against the technological mechanization of life. Lorenz states that popular themes involved "a fairytale and dreamlike atmosphere, and touch[ed] on issues which at the time were taboo." Furthermore, Jugendstil in literary form is characterized by descriptions of plant life, flowers, and fantastic creatures, all aspects found in "Den Forbandede Ord." This literary technique has not garnered much critical attention since gothic scholars tend to focus on the role of the supernatural and macabre as depicting psychological tension rather than as a reworking of fairy-tale elements.

As Yvonne Leffler states in her study of the supernatural and fantastic in late-nineteenth-century Swedish literature, later writers incorporated the supernatural through the guise of realistic depiction to focus on inner psychological turmoil. When such narratives use the first-person perspective, they often utilize an unreliable narrator and focus on psychological disturbance, aspects that differ from earlier depictions of gothic themes in Romantic literature. Leffler posits that certain authors employ elements of the fantastic to "tell another story, to reveal something marginalized, something hidden or taboo" throughout depictions of eroticism in their narratives (58). Some examples include depicting taboo desires, thus prompting a character to see their

[2] Lorenz explains that this aesthetic includes the meandering line motif such as "flower garlands, women's flowing hair, dragons, and other fabulous animals."

psychological tension manifested through supernatural figures like ghosts or vampires. Certainly, Jølsen does not shame the decision of her protagonist but rather elaborates on the dark and lurid aspects of her curiosity, such as the protagonist's interest in loving Guldmanden, who shares similarities with the evil worm. In this regard, Jølsen comments on how women's curiosity for dangerous and mysterious men functions as a taboo, as social norms mandated that women choose wisely for the sake of marriage and family.

In their book *Nordic Gothic* (2020), Maria Holmgren Troy et al. further investigate why few details about gothic trends in late-nineteenth-century Nordic literature have gained critical attention. Much of the description of the gothic becomes subsumed under the Neoromantic trend during the late nineteenth to early twentieth century. Troy et al. discuss the Swedish writer Selma Lagerlöf, who uses forest landscapes to challenge her protagonists, as the forest is the site of not only fear and danger but also of self-transformation. In Lagerlöf's novel *Gösta Berlings Saga* (1891), the lady of the forest drives men crazy with desire and curses those who do not grant her wishes. Drawing on folkloric Scandinavian female figures, Lagerlöf depicts this mysterious woman of the forest as a *femme fatale* with animalistic qualities such as a red fox tail. In this series of stories, Lagerlöf uses this figure to teach another character—Märta Dohna, The Countess of Borg—a lesson about being selfish by cursing her to be eaten by magpies (Troy et al. 36-39). Troy et al. also cite Jølsen's novel *Rikka Gan* as exemplifying gothic literature since Jølsen sets her protagonist in a psychological conflict as she starts to find her identity with both her familial past and the history of her house (15). Thus, the dangers of nature bring out the psychological shortcomings of humans, whose flaws necessitate change. Similar to Troy et al.'s discussion of Lagerlöf's folkloric short stories, Jølsen's depiction of nature appears as a realistic world with supernatural aspects. Furthermore, Guldmanden's changing appearance emphasizes his ambiguity,

which is similar to Lagerlöf's depiction of the forest lady from *Gösta Berlings Saga* and her use of the *femme fatale* (Troy et al. 39), a point explained below. Additionally, the mystical woman suggests the role of the Sophia, the wise older woman archetype from Carl Jung's feminine archetypes, as well as the mentor character in Joseph Campbell's theory of the hero's journey. If viewed through the Jungian approach, this fairy tale portrays a woman's acceptance of her darker side by perceiving the confrontation between the protagonist and Guldmanden as the syzygy, or the merging of the feminine anima and masculine animus energy as the culmination of the journey (Arte 157). While one reading of the story does coincide with a heroine's journey of self-acceptance, reading Guldmanden as a distinctive character allows the protagonist an opportunity to overcome the sublime. Nonetheless, acknowledging the parts of the story that coincide with Jung's and Campbell's ideas allows the view of the protagonist as enduring psychological tension, grappling through darkness to find light.

Guldmanden as a Dark Character that Offers a Choice

Before the introduction of Guldmanden, the narrator opens the story on the protagonist's mother in a rural setting. She is aware of nature's beauty and evils—an important characteristic as it explains the protagonist's connection to Guldmanden. Young and in the arms of her mother, the protagonist is initially protected from the threats of nature. One day in a garden, a worm hisses at the mother, who accidentally falls and causes the child to see "Verdens Lys under Ormens røde Blik og under den graa Fugls jublende Sang" [the world's light through the worm's red stare and through the gray bird's jubilant song] (184). Jølsen sets up a contrast between the evil worm and the kind bird, yet the child's association with both enables her to see beauty in all kinds of nature. The child grows up loving the world's beauty, including the evil snake and the bird's peaceful

song on summer nights. The nature scenery recalls Jølsen's proclivities to set her characters in a "fairy-like farm surrounded by dark mysterious forests," similar to what she experienced in childhood (Simut 62). Given this context, Jølsen furthers the fairy tale format by imbuing the female protagonist with power to see beauty in both the light and the darkness of nature, thus presenting her with a choice that will bring conflict.

As a character representing the light, the mystical woman in the woods advises the protagonist that every object in nature has its proper role based on its physical form and function. Jølsen foreshadows the significance of the young woman's interaction with the mystical woman, who warns her of her fondness for the wild. This mystical woman "kjendte ogsaa Kjærligheds og Elskovs lunefulde gyldne dunkle Veie" [knew also love's whimsical golden dark path] (184-85). When the protagonist asks where the mystical woman gets her red berries, she responds that she gets them where the worm lives, but that one must practice caution and not wander in this area due to the chance of getting poisoned. This advice illustrates the conflict in the protagonist's journey as a process of individuation and growth. In his article, "Innocence as a Super-Power: Little Girls on the Hero's Journey," David Emerson criticizes the lack of faithful representation of the heroine in Campbell's monomyth and argues that innocence portrays a better perspective of women's roles as heroines, rather than merely creating warrior women who embody masculine traits within a woman's body. Emerson furthermore advocates for the value of using the "feminine qualities of the heroes, rather than merely the physical fact of being female" in his assessment of young girls' innocence in the coming-of-age process as part of their heroic journey (132). In his analysis of different young female characters, Emerson extols the feminine traits of compassion, of having a loving sense of community and family, and of emotional intelligence (143).

While it might be problematic to restrict these traits to women, Emerson critiques Campbell's hero's journey monomyth as recognizing only one kind of heroic process when in fact the emotional journey and coming of age of different characters demand different changes. As Terri Frontgia clarifies, the coming of age for male heroes entails overcoming challenges to bring about inner journeys and quests for identity, yet for girls maturity into womanhood develops from natural growth rather than a challenge their identities (16). As Lee R. Edwards asserts in her assessment of female heroism in the myth of Psyche and Eros, this tale shows how both characters, but more so Psyche, perform feats for the sake of love, showing how heroism "depends on the transforming and transcendent qualities that link social change to love and individuation for both men and women" (45). Since Jølsen bestows choice and powers on her young protagonist to decipher her feelings for the light and the darkness, she presents her with an opportunity to confront an internal conflict between fear and hatred. Unlike Edwards's claim about Psyche and Eros, however, much of this conflict depends on the protagonist's ability to love Guldmanden despite the barriers that arise.

The narrator introduces Guldmanden as a rumor within the village where other people report seeing a peculiar man who looks almost human yet who commands power over nature. For this reason, Jølsen portrays the protagonist's first encounter with Guldmanden as encompassing other aspects of nature, just like when she was a child and heard the gray bird's song while gazing into the worm's red eyes. When the woman first encounters Guldmanden, she hears a woodpecker whose knocking on a tree resembles a clock's ticking. Shortly after, she hears violin strings, thus luring her into his territory. This multitude of sensations also impacts her sight. As she steps over twigs on her way to the mountain, she discovers that they stiffen underneath her feet to become like concrete steps. Additionally, when turning to look back, she notices how impenetrable her

path has become. She observes that the nettles bend easily as she heads toward the mountain but then stiffen and sharpen when she tries to turn back. When she sees a small man striking a stone with a hammer, she freezes but does not feel fear. The narrator describes her state of mind, saying, "Hun kunde slet ikke føle Angst, for dertil var Synet for pudsigt, og blev længe staaende stille og betragte det lille Væsen, spørgende sig selv, hvad ialverden dette kunde være" [She could not feel fear at all, because the vision was too strange for that, and stood still for a long time and watched the little creature, asking herself what on earth this could be] (189). As the woman tries to make sense of this creature with human hands—"med korte Ben og stor Gevækst paa Ryggen" [with short legs and a large growth on the back] (187)—and with secretive movements like a worm, she uses her reason to determine that this creature cannot be a man but must be some mystical creature. The narrator describes the figure's movement, saying "pludselig gled Skikkelsen ned mod Jorden, lydløst, lynrapt, med Lemmerne sprikende som en Edderkop der firer sig ned af en Spindeltraad" [the figure slid down towards the ground, soundless, lightning quick, with its limbs throbbing like a spider clawing its way down a spider's thread] (190), and reporting how the nettles give way to make the woman fall as if she were in a spider's web, blurring the distinction between figurative and concrete meanings.

The strange description of Guldmanden with its darker implications suggests the role of the abject in gothic character portrayal. Using Julia Kristeva's ideas of the abject,[3] Katsbjerg describes the gothic body as a separation of boundaries between subject and object and gives doubles and uncanny others as examples (36). While Guldmanden may have a gothic body due to

[3] According to Kristeva, the abject is that which is oppositional to the subject. It is a "jettisoned object, is radically excluded and draws [a subject] toward the place where meaning collapses" (2). In psychoanalytic terms, the abject also resists repression and transformation in the ego and causes symptoms of immediate revulsion, such as vomiting. After seeing Kristeva's comparisons to the abject as "a terror that dissembles, a hatred that smiles, a passion that uses the body for barter instead of inflaming it, a debtor who sells you up, a friend who stabs you" (4), I do not see Guldmanden as exemplifying the abject due to his reciprocated feelings for the protagonist. He shares some qualities of the abject but lacks the traits required for the protagonist's revulsion and rejection of him.

his duplicitous appearance and ambiguity, he does not symbolize an internalized aspect of the protagonist as subject. Yet, he does inspire self-reflection within the protagonist when she has a sublime reaction to him. Furthermore, as Kristeva describes in regard to the sublime, the object eliciting a sublime response fascinates and makes the viewer sense beyond their capabilities of seeing, hearing, or thinking. Like the abject, the object that inspires a sublime reaction has numerous characteristics or "clusters of meaning, of colors, of words, of caresses" (Kristeva 12).

Though Guldmanden does not reveal the extent of his powers, he demonstrates them to the protagonist through his ability to manipulate his surroundings, making her see that he is part of the nettle bushes, mountains, stones, and trees. Even when she first stares into his eyes and becomes transfixed—similar to her first gaze upon the worm when she was a child—the woman perceives light within him but also visions of the nearby mountains, stones, nettles, and twigs that shelter him. This assertion coincides with Tiberg's assessment of Jølsen's experiences of being in the forest, which motivated her to create a protagonist who gains mastery over Guldmanden. Tiberg states, "Der var en umættelig trang i hende til at lære alt at kjende, i livets og i drømmenes verden, godt og ondt, sorger og glæder—alt vilde hun ha tak i med egne sanser" [There was an insatiable urge in her to learn everything to know, in the world of life and dreams, good and evil, sorrow and happiness—everything she could grasp at with her own senses] (33). Jølsen infuses a quest for knowledge about nature into the protagonist's perceptions. When she first engages with Guldmanden, she perceives "Som i et skinnende Speil saa hun Uren med Stenene, Neslen, og Kvistene. Og Fjeldvæggen … Og Skogen, som tegned sig mod Himmelen" [As in a shinning mirror, she saw Uren with the stones, the nettles, and the twigs. And the mountain wall … and the forest that drew up to the sky] (191). Once the young woman observes Guldmanden, she captures a more comprehensive view of the surrounding nature.

Such a strange characterization is typical of Jølsen's male lovers, who are depicted as being seen previously in dreams or as supernatural figures. This pattern also occurs in Jølsen's longer narratives, such as *Rikka Gan*, in which Pål Bjørby analyzes erotic fulfillment as something that goes beyond traditional feminine roles. Bjørby asserts that desire "figures as Rikka's all-consuming sense of identity, inner being, and purpose—and, when thwarted, ends in her sense of anguish, her violent outlashing, her demonic inner life" (135). Jølsen overturns domesticity by having Rikka confront the predicament of prostituting herself to the landlord of her farm to maintain her livelihood and that of her brother and his family (Bjørby 132).

As seen in her use of a dream male lover in *Rikka Gan*, Jølsen characterizes male lovers as supernatural men in order to suggest that women can overcome the risks they take to pursue their sexual interests. As Kristina Sjögren states in her analysis of *Rikka Gan*, Jølsen subverts the literary trend of the *femme fatale* by switching this role to a male character to create a *l'homme fatale* (476). As previously mentioned in their analysis of the forest lady as a *femme fatale*, Troy et al. explain the *femme fatale* as drawing on gothic horror to inspire change in Märta Dohna's character in Lägerlof's stories (2020). As a *l'homme fatale* figure, Guldmanden's changing appearance and fantastic abilities to lure the protagonist appear, as Troy et al. say, "sexual and dangerous, possibly lethal" (39), though the narrator provides no detail about any sexual encounter between them except to say that the protagonist begins to love Guldmanden after he takes her to his underground kingdom. In line with Sjögren's discussion of the significance of the *l'homme fatale* figure in *Rikka Gan*, Jølsen depicts Guldmanden as wormlike or snakelike, a symbol she uses in *Rikka Gan* to show the danger of men's sexual nature, though the protagonist feels no shame when she chooses to love him. Despite Jølsen's ability to depict sexual encounters in her novels, her lack of description of the protagonist's encounter with Guldmanden, other than her love for him, implies

an encounter by her choice alone. Furthermore, with Guldmanden as a *l'homme fatale* to lure her, the protagonist experiences an opportunity to forgo the mystical woman's warnings of the evil worm or snakelike creature to discover her own feelings regarding him. Through her decision to love him in his many manifestations, the protagonist is attracted to him as part of her attraction to the lush forest and the sounds in nature. Considering Jølsen's characterization of Guldmanden as part of the sublime in nature, the magnitude of the protagonist's choice becomes enhanced.

The Role of the Sublime

In *Critique of Judgement* (1790), Immanuel Kant explains how the sublime initially elicits a person's ability to reason to comprehend an object while also having a "momentary inhibition of the vital forces followed immediately by an outpouring of them" (98). As the mind attempts to comprehend the magnitude of a sublime reaction to an object, a person's imagination also activates and creates a feeling of temporary repulsion. While Kant postulates that an object of nature cannot be termed sublime, one might refer to an object's emotional effect on a person as sublime. Kant further explains how the sublime entails an internal search within a thought process to demonstrate an aesthetic response (98-100). This paradoxical feeling of awe and fear demonstrates the experience of how a person tries to understand the magnitude of the sublime response, yet in trying to comprehend it, might feel a momentary power over the object they are examining (106). The sublime reaction that Jølsen's protagonist feels as she deciphers the essence of Guldmanden in relation to his creation further deepens as he chooses to show her his power.

Thus, similar to Kant's explanation of the part of nature, such as the ocean in a storm,[4] the natural object is not necessarily a sublime object but rather the process by which the woman senses the different parts of nature, such as the mountain, the stones, or the nettles. By doing so, she comprehends that Guldmanden creates his domain, but he also transports her into other parts of his world. Furthermore, similar to Kant's notion of the sublime that a person who witnesses a terrifying form of nature feels pleasure due to also feeling safety, the young woman gains a form of pleasure that overtakes her initial fear. The feeling of the sublime develops within her as she continues to experience visions that show his domain, proving his superiority above a typical man since his identity includes the surrounding nature.

The duality in this experience is best understood through Kant's explanation of how a person can react in two different ways. Kant articulates the following to capture his nuanced feeling of the sublime: "the feeling of sublime is a feeling of displeasure that arises from the imagination's inadequacy, in an aesthetic estimation of magnitude, for an estimation by reason, but is at the same time also a pleasure" (114-5). In other words, a person might experience a paradoxical feeling of frustration and bliss when encountering an object that invokes the sublime. Despite being unable to estimate its vastness either in form or meaning, an object inspiring the sublime effect also reminds the person that they are using their judgement to rationalize it. Thus, when Jølsen's protagonist regards nature, she encounters Guldmanden in different ways to illustrate how she might be independent of him but also be above the laws that govern him. In this way, the young woman's experiences with him demonstrate how *she* allows him to explore her sexuality through her choice to love him. When the young woman meets Guldmanden, she feels both admiration and

[4] According to Kant, this description of the vast ocean in a storm comes up as examples to illustrate a sublime reaction based on a person's distance from it. Such examples indicate the internal reaction eliciting a sublime reaction as opposed to the beautiful that elicits admiration due to its external qualities (99, 111, 120).

fear as he takes her with him to explore his abilities as a supernatural being. Yet, crucial to understanding her experience with Guldmanden, her early memory entails curiosity for darkness through her association of it with beauty. In other words, the protagonist's ability to equate the beauty of the bird's song with the glaring red eyes of the worm explains her eagerness to consummate her love affair with Guldmanden: "Og føielige var Kvistene nu som før, ja, nærsagt har de hende til ham. Rødt skinned Guldmandens Øine som de røde Aarer i Bjerget, som Ormeblikket i Stenene. Bare syntes hun nok at en enslig Fugl sang saa vemodig i Skogen etsteds" [And the twigs were docile now as before, yes, they almost carried her to him. The Goldman's eyes shone red like the red veins in the mountain, like the worm's eye in the stones. It just seemed to her that a lone bird was singing so mournfully in the forest somewhere] (193). Guldmanden's mysterious air shows how he captivates the young woman; yet, despite his allure, she decides only at that moment whether to love him and give herself to him. This brief reflective moment of choosing to give herself to him mirrors an aspect of Kant's notion of the sublime as eliciting the human ability to use reason. As Melissa McBay Merrit explains, "our enjoyment of the sublime in nature makes available to reflection something about our essence as rational beings, not our instincts as animal beings" (38). Although the narrator explains how Guldmanden shows her the deepest part of his cave and the different hallways, this imagery functions as a metaphor for the protagonist's exploration of his world. She explores his realm just as the innocent lone bird sings mournfully, implying her loss of innocence. Thus, this imagery alludes to her sexual awakening and her pursuit of her desire even though the narrator does not explicitly provide details about a sexual encounter.

Yet, her decreasing fear of him and her power over his decision-making concerning creation in nature implies an intimate bond. When he takes her to the bottom of the earth, she

advises him to build a high tower to examine the stars and to plant trees to enhance the setting. In this manner, she manifests power over him even though he possesses supernatural abilities to create the objects she mentions. He agrees and tells her about his upcoming departure and absence for the time needed to create a high tower from the earth, thus showing her influence over him. The narrator provides no explanation about his disappearance, hinting that the young woman's strong convictions allow her to momentarily forget him and seek the company of another man.

Despite her strong feelings for this other man, the protagonist visits the forest only to see Guldmanden, who happens to reappear at that moment, as though she summons him through her thoughts. After he disappears again, the woman walks through the woods and uses her ability to sense him in the woods when she feels the blossoming of the forest: "Det bruste i Verdens de store Skoge—det hvisked i Verdens de dybe Haver—det klang i Verdens samstemmige Guitarer—ja, bruste og hvisked og klang—hun hørte, fornam det alt, der kun kom fra Vildmarken, Stenrøsene og Blaabjelderne, de giftige skjønne" [It roared in the world's great forests—it whispered in the world's deep Gardens—it sounded in the world's guitars that resounded in unison—yes, roaring and whispering and sounding—she heard, sensed it all that came only from the wilderness, the rocks and the bluebells, the poisonous beauties] (196). When the woman feels this movement in nature, she knows that Guldmanden has returned, showing how strongly she can sense him. After feeling that he has returned, she goes to his place in the forest where she had met him in the past. Having experienced the sublime when she first met him, she now experiences the might of nature through her interactions with him and can hear the roaring of the forest, the rocks and bluebells. By connecting beauty with poison, Jølsen brings the duality of darkness and light into the woman's ability to comprehend the forest and Guldmanden, as her association with him gave her some of his abilities. Due to her understanding of Guldmanden as encompassing nature, her actions of

anticipating him show an intellectual response, which helps her overcome her initial feelings of fear and disgust and to use her understanding of the changes in nature to sense his return. By feeling and understanding nature's movements more keenly than she did when she was younger, the woman internalizes her perception of nature and uses her mind to show domination over her initial fear. This change in her identity marks her growth in emotional fortitude and reasoning, traits she needs to overcome the troubling implications of her decision to love him. Similar to the challenge posed in her growth process, she perceives the light in Guldmanden, yet she proves her strength when she faces the dark consequences in her choices. Through an understanding of her choices, she crafts her identity and tests the limits of her love for him, and this newfound ability to anticipate him through the sounds of the forest proves to be the first of several trials that impact her choice to love him.

Another minor trial includes a brief description of the young woman's short-lived relationship with a mortal man and its subsequent end, prompting the return of Guldmanden and a revival of her declaration of love for him. Little is said of this relationship other than the woman's claim that this man is her wildest dream, one that tragically ends due to an unlucky ring. Instead, the narrative focuses on Guldmanden's return and his question if she has loved someone else, which prompts her to lie to him after finding that "havde han for stor en Magt over hende" [he had a great power over her] (196). Such power induces her to love him once more—presumably engaging in acts of intimacy with him—though she experiences feelings of hatred for him afterward. After years of visiting him and returning to her home, he promises her that he will show her something new and craft golden necklaces and chains if she visits him the next day. Despite the darkness that her choices entail, the woman bravely deals with the consequences, a point that

suggests how she experiences the sublime and shows power enhanced by her femininity and agency through her ability to love.

The Role of the Mystical Woman: A Source of Light

While not a major character in the story, the mystical woman gives the protagonist advice about Guldmanden and at the beginning and end of the story explains the advantages women have over men. If not for these wise words, the story would portray the lot of women negatively. As Sjögren states in her analysis of *Rikka Gan*, Jølsen alludes to Mother Earth and fertility goddesses when centering the role of women's sexuality (473). In Jungian terms, this mystical woman resembles the fourth level of the unconscious male aspect of women in the synergy of the anima and animus where, as Shubhangana Atre says, "a woman can bridge the gap between the conscious and the unconscious mind" (157). At this point of "Den Forbandede Ord," the protagonist looks almost as old as the mystical woman, suggesting that the protagonist's journey of love and acceptance of the light and the darkness in her choices has led her to a full life. While not much is given about the life of the mystical woman, she possesses the knowledge to explain the protagonist's issues from young age to maturity. Near the story's conclusion, the young woman, who has grown older, asks the mystical woman in the forest about the reason for her path in life. The woman asks, "Hvorfor … har de vært saa for mig altid, at der jeg har trodd at fange Lyset, der er altid Lyset blit mig forment?" [Why … has it always been so for me that where I have thought to catch the Light, the Light has always been formed for me?], and the mystical woman responds, saying "Det er … fordi du ellers havde naadd det der er over Menneskers Lod Over Roser og Torne gaar Menneskets Vei" [It is … because you had reached that which is above the lot of men. Over

roses and thorns goes the way of Man] with a voice that "lød som selve Skogens dybe Orgeltoner" [sound[s] like the deep organ tones of the forest itself] (200).

When the mystical woman says that the protagonist has "reached that which is above the lot of men" (200), she suggests that women's choices are part of their agency and above the restrictions binding men to their fates. When the mystic mentions that men's lives entail going over roses and thorns, she implies that men experience hardships yet do not overcome them. For this reason, she suggests that the protagonist can go beyond what is expected from men due to her natural ability as a woman to accept the consequences of her actions. Though the mystical woman provides little explanation other than these words, her quick response indicates that the protagonist accepted her fate so easily because it seems like the light was formed for her. This light occurs despite her previous choices that her curiosity led her to. These words reinforce the view that the young woman experiences a sublime event since a woman's fate entails reaching beyond what men can achieve. By doing so, their ability to choose and reason over these choices corresponds to emotional and logical faculties during a confrontation with the sublime.

Allusion to the Dynamically Sublime

As Yena Lee explains Kant's notion of the dynamically sublime, she states that unlike the mathematically sublime,[5] the dynamically sublime "demonstrates our superiority over nature in recognizing that neither internal nor external nature has power over us" (45). Through the power of reasoning, one overcomes a fear of the object in nature, hence overcoming the power from

[5] The mathematically sublime describes the type of sublime reaction one experiences when encountering a large object in nature that arouses one's reasoning to think of mathematical figures to measure it. Due to the fact that one only catches parts of the whole object in nature and cannot understand it in terms of exact measurements, one feels a bit disheartened. Nonetheless, the process allows a person to discover that they have the ability to reason, and this discovery itself is part of the sublime reaction (Kant 111-115, Lee 44).

within the person. Kant articulates the dynamically sublime as the realization that nature has no dominance over a person. A person comes to this idea after initially sensing fear when viewing a certain phenomenon, yet uses reason to comprehend the phenomenon that diminishes the fear:

> And it is only by presupposing this idea within us, and by referring to it, that we can arrive at the idea of the sublimity of that being who arouses deep respect in us, not just by his might as demonstrated in nature, but even more by the ability, with which we have been endowed, to judge nature without fear and to think of our vocation as being sublimely above nature. (123)

The key words "above the lot of men" and "our vocation as being sublimely above nature" imply an advantage in a person—in Jølsen's story, women—more powerful than the rules that guide men. While Kant describes an aesthetic experience that all humans can have in reaction to nature, the application of his words to this tale provides a way to clarify Jølsen's goal for the story as well as to disregard the negative implications of the young woman's curious relationship with Guldmanden.

In the conversation between the protagonist and the mystical woman, the narrator explains life's vicissitudes and their concomitant pleasures and sacrifices that enable women to accept emotional difficulties, such as having conflicted feelings for a supernatural man. For this reason, the younger woman phrases her question as wanting to "catch the light" but finding it "formed for [her]." Perhaps due to the adversity of her experiences, she seeks a particular goal of finding beauty in both the benevolent and frightening only to realize that her innate ability makes it seem like the goal—like the light—was already formed for her. In this concluding scene, the mystical woman leaves the reader with her advice to the protagonist and affirms that women's lot in life rises above that of men. Inherent in women's identity lies the strength and resilience to overcome any darkness.

Due to this facility, the protagonist's ability to reason and consider herself above nature and its potential dangers reflects the dynamically sublime.

The mystical woman's words gain significance when considering the protagonist's sacrifice to go with the benevolent god despite her commitment to Guldmanden, thus reflecting a component of the sublime in this religious conflict. Near the end of the story, before she seeks counsel from the mystical woman, the young woman hears the birds sing and sees a golden staircase leading to the sky towards "en ung Gud med to Løver for sin Fod," [a young God with two lions at his feet] (199). While she ascends to heaven, she hears Guldmanden's voice among the trees wail "Ormiliv, Ormiliv" [Worm life, worm life] (199), and she then throws herself back to the earth, a scene described as "i Sorg og Vildskab" [grief and wildness], (199) where she remains committed. When Guldmanden hisses at her with the words "worm life," he reminds her of her commitment to him, a choice that would forsake her entry into heaven with the benevolent god. The contrast between the benevolent god and Guldmanden shows that the woman's commitment to Guldmanden and nature supersedes her connection to her faith. Even though she initially reaches out to the benevolent god and expresses her preference to go with him, the fulfillment of her promise to Guldmanden demonstrates her own will to revere nature more highly.

The young woman experiences struggles and plights that affect all humankind, yet her ability to witness the beauties and terrors of nature provides her with an ability to reason through their influence. She uses her reason to overthrow the challenges presented to her, thus demonstrating agency over her actions. As Melissa McBay Merritt clarifies in her explanation of the dynamically sublime, a person who experiences fear in regard to an object yet who does not move away from it shows independence from that object through the act of reflecting on their safety, despite its potential danger (40). The protagonist holds onto her powers and uses her innate

knowledge of nature to exert her will over Guldmanden's. By not condemning her protagonist's actions for choosing to pursue her curiosity for Guldmanden, Jølsen asserts women's strength by showing how they overcome tragic consequences through their heroic journeys, experiences that consist of both choice and acceptance of consequences.

In choosing Guldmanden, the woman explores her preference for the darker aspects of nature, such as her fondness for the worm's gaze, but also her powers to perceive the sublime. By creating a character who perceives the simultaneously terrifying yet alluring, Jølsen captures an experience that is both intellectual and emotional, thus allowing her protagonist to grow through conflict. Through the sensuous details in her depiction of the forest and in the protagonist's paradoxical trepidation and fascination with Guldmanden, Jølsen exemplifies a woman's sexual agency without overtly describing a sexual encounter. While Jølsen provides power to her female character, she does not shy away from portraying the troubling aspects of following one's desire, such as suffering through conflicting feelings and forgoing entry into heaven. Despite this factor, the protagonist willfully maintains that Guldmanden does not control her desire, but that she chooses to love him on her own volition and accepts both light and dark aspects of desire. As Garton asserts in her analysis of Jølsen's last novel, *Hollases knønike,* a woman's confrontation with her sexuality entails the acknowledgement of not only the "summer nights, pastel colors" (77) but also the darker tones of life. By doing so, she becomes less vulnerable to its unappealing aspects. Despite the darker consequences of her choice, the protagonist experiences peace in her final discussion with the mystical woman. Had Jølsen written this story in the social critical style, she would have shamed her protagonist by portraying her as a social outcast. If she had taken a more decadent style, her protagonist would be a victim of Guldmanden and would have suffered in his realm. Furthermore, especially when considering Jung's and Campell's ideas, Jølsen hints

at a female heroic journey through a choice of love, though the fairy tale suggests rather than fully fleshes out these details. Through peaceful and reflective conversation with the mystical woman, the protagonist ponders her choices but also knows that her fated strength outshines the darker implications because she has been true to herself.

In writing a fairy tale about the acceptance of fate, Jølsen takes a bold step by making a woman's choice to love and embrace her individuality the main conflict. Though she does not provide details of other moments except for the passing of time before her conversation with the mystical woman, the fragmentary parts of the story make sense as a tale about a woman fated to choose a forest life through her ability since childhood to see its beauty in both the light and the darkness. The woman, in a sublime encounter, gains power over Guldmanden through her choice to love him, despite meeting someone better and receiving taunts from birds. While one might be tempted to categorize this fairy tale as a social critique, an example of gothic literature, or a heroic tale, its varied aspects as an example of all three make this tale a mysterious story of fate. Similar to Edwards's assessment of Psyche and Eros as a tale of the liberation of love as "the most heroic one of all," (49) "Den Fordbandte Ord" reveals the power of a woman's choice, even if her lesson entails psychological challenges. Part of the protagonist's journey through the light and the darkness involves acceptance of the consequences of making a promise and of staying true to one's word.

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Media Reviews

Herbarium as Occult Archive: Feminine Botanical Knowledge in Digital Games

Review by Stacey Hoffer

Throughout the nineteenth century, herbariums functioned as occult archives, or spaces where botanical knowledge operated as both scientific object and enchantment. While magical properties might appear at odds with scientific ones, this dual nature created productive tensions rather than simple contradictions. Twenty-first-century game design teams, including the creative forces behind *Strange Horticulture* (Bad Viking 2022), *Botany Manor* (Balloon Studios 2024), and *Potion Craft* (niceplay games 2021), have focused on this liminal cultural space of enchantment and empiricism. But before analyzing how these games do so, I would like to address more of the cultural context that makes their existence possible.

The herbarium as occult archive navigated not only tensions between scientific objectivity and mystical contexts, but also between feminine empowerment and patriarchal containment. Women participated actively in nineteenth-century botanical culture, creating illustrated albums and pressing specimens. Yet their work regularly crisscrossed the boundaries between scientific expertise and enforced aesthetic performance. Although societal pressures against their names in print kept their contributions anonymous, women frequently contributed to the scientific field as illustrators, botanists, and specimen collectors. Victorian gender ideology encouraged this participation, positioning women as naturally suited to botanical study, either through their alignment with natural landscapes or their supposed emotional sensitivity and moral refinement. However, as Diane Purkiss suggests in *The Witch in History* (2003), aligning women with plants and nature did not necessarily lead to feminist liberation; instead, this symbolic alignment both

constrained and enabled their botanical expertise. Women's botanical studies operated on a basis of containment, where botanical practice remained safely decorative or confined to gardens and glass houses. These practices also remained within the context of enchantment, prioritizing symbolism, sentiment, or setting over scientific accuracy. Their work often underwent commodification as accomplishment rather than expertise, a decorative hobby rather than scientific study. Even when women prioritized botanical study, they practiced in isolation from professional institutions that wielded actual scientific authority.

This tension between opportunity and constraint manifested in everything, such as botanical illustration, where women resisted scientific strictures by drawing plants in their natural habitats. There are also darker historical precedents like Giulia Tofana's "Aqua Tofana," a cosmetic created by a supposed perfumer who instead provided poisonous expedients for abusive husbands, linking feminine botanical expertise with both agency and danger. The herbarium as occult archive represents how these values culminate in the contradictory spaces where nineteenth-century women's genuine botanical knowledge existed alongside aesthetic performance.

Contemporary games like *Strange Horticulture*, *Botany Manor*, and *Potion Craft* also participate in this tradition, their cozy aesthetics and puzzle mechanics echoing the nineteenth-century tension between botanical mastery and enforced domestication, between plants as objects of serious study and plants as vehicles for feminized enchantment. *Strange Horticulture* casts players as the owner of a plant shop in England's Lake District, where over sixteen days they identify occult flora for customers, cross-referencing botanical descriptions against a large compendium. The game constrains the player behind the counter, keeping them isolated in studying the compendium. The player's agency, limited to providing delicate plants as commodities for sale, nevertheless relies on an enchanted relationship with plants and their

mysteries. *Botany Manor* follows Arabella, a Victorian botanist solving plant-based puzzles within her ancestral estate to cultivate extinct species while navigating systematic professional exclusion. She sends letters, publishes papers, and ultimately creates community in isolation, converting her manor into a school for natural science. *Potion Craft* positions the player as a medieval alchemist managing a potion shop, experimenting with ingredients on an alchemical map to discover recipes for customers ranging from healers to poisoners, reducing botanical knowledge primarily to resource management and economic exchange.

As sites where the herbarium as occult archive illustrates tensions in a gendered context, these games negotiate the structural contradiction of feminine botanical knowledge: as a potentially dangerous tool for agency, it must somehow be contained within domesticated safety. While the shopkeepers in *Strange Horticulture* and *Potion Craft* remain safe behind the counter, their plants contribute to furthering conspiracies, cultist activities, and alchemical discoveries with widespread impacts on the people living in their communities. By contrast, in *Botany Manor* the female scientist locked safely behind the garden gate sends letters, publishes papers, and continues pursuing botanical knowledge. Perhaps it is telling *Botany Manor* features the only explicitly female player character, with all the inherent containment and isolation that gendering entails. Whether blurring, reinforcing, or exploring boundaries, these games reflect how the herbarium as an occult archive continues to resist simple binaries. Instead, upon close inspection, these tensions blossom into complexities as magnificent as they are mysterious.

***Strange Horticulture*: Enchanted Agency Through Cozy Horror**

Strange Horticulture is a cozy horror game, mixing puzzles and adventures with a horizontal core mechanic where players pass plants or elixirs across the screen to patrons of a small

apothecary. Applying Carolyn Miller's genre theory, where genre is as genre does, the cozy horror genre domesticates potential threats into manageable, familiar routines. *Strange Horticulture* creates an aesthetic where supernatural threats are domesticated into daily ritual. Ancient folklore operates through familiar customer service exchanges, and mystical confrontations are prepared for with methodical care, like tending a plant. A study in contrasts, the herbarium juxtaposes mundane shop management against menacing, underlying occult mysteries. Elements like looking up and identifying plants create ludic humdrum, starkly contrasting their supernatural results.

As the owner of a plant shop in England's Lake District, the narrative spans sixteen days. During this time, players identify flora based on descriptions, cross-referencing plants against a large compendium (the archive). Sometimes new plants come via map coordinates or cryptic clues. The lush language in the game serves an occult function, with names such as "Lady of Summer" and "Forest Camphry" contrasting more ominous appellations like "Devil's Nightcap" and "Widow's Woe." In this way, *Strange Horticulture* suggests that the mystical has always been part of rural life, hidden in plain sight among herbs, maps, and the quiet rhythms of a small English town. Here, the game suggests, a knowledgeable herbalist might bind the supernatural threat, take mystical control, or join a cult's ritual depending on inclination. Either way, it's just another Thursday.

As a site recovering the dangerous qualities Victorian domestication denies, *Strange Horticulture* achieves success through a complex synthesis. The customer's requests, aligned against other requests, considered against specimens, maps, and the underlying narrative, create a web where the player must navigate multiple clues to access the story and push the narrative forward. This complexity illustrates the layered way the herbarium as occult archive functions to enchant while simultaneously achieving results with some predictability. Echoing the life-and-

death stakes apothecaries participated in during previous centuries, this game not only demonstrates how ethical agency functions in these scenarios, but also how pressure is put on the proprietor navigating these demands.

The key mechanic differentiating *Strange Horticulture*, aside from aesthetic choices and the engaging secret-society-ridden storyline, is the "mind shattering" innovation. If a player incorrectly identifies a plant more than three times, then they must solve a quick physical puzzle to metaphorically put themselves back together. Successful navigation and negotiation, then, becomes a method in which players access self-determination and self-confidence. This recovers the link between isolated, solitary study and agency. For better or worse, the herbarium as an occult archive creates an interconnected power structure, with the player apothecary at the center in this story. Careful reading reveals this as an illusion, however, as the player's agency relies on the customers and their trust in the apothecary's archival expertise.

Bypassing the male-dominated scientific fields of biology and botany, the game designers instead create a symbolic language of their own. The recoded and renamed plants in *Strange Horticulture* force the apothecary to complete the compendium through trial and error and identification, echoing the process by which plants acquired symbolic meaning in floriography. The game's herbarium functions more along these lines than Linnaean classification categories. In *Good Observers of Nature: American Women and the Scientific Study of the Natural World, 1820-1885* (2007), Tina Gianquitto describes how floriography "neatly reduced the diversity of nature to simple associations" and "exploited the emotional and devotional aspects of nature study" (1). But she continues to say how, even within this divine context, women acknowledged floriography's limitations, both as scientific and symbolic systems. Rather, as science progressed, the enchanted and rational world would continuously intersect.

As a response navigating these inherent tensions, *Strange Horticulture* presents a context where theological presence remains absent. The "transcendent" framework Charles Taylor describes in *A Secular Age* (2007) is nowhere to be found in the narrative. There is no *Strange Horticulture* advisory board, no God overseeing moral order, no religious authority structuring ethics. The game presents what Taylor would call an "immanent" enchantment, where plants possess inherent spiritual power. A priest never comes to the counter to purchase herbs for blessing or banishing, although notably, an occult priestess does, as does her chosen virgin sacrifice. These agents without religious containment operate in an ethical gray area. The choice, in all its ethical complexity, relies solely on the player to support or deter the cult's actions, either saving or condemning the sacrifice to her fate. Likewise, although the player remains buffered by the screen, the plants within the game act more like Taylor's divine spirits, animistic forces rather than agents of a deity, impacting the characters like malevolent spirits deployed by the cosmos without theological scaffolding. Therefore, the player and the characters offer an enchanted context for the herbarium as an occult archive. Each plant represents a means toward an end, whether nefarious like Aqua Tofana or inscrutable, like obscure floriographic messages with ambivalent meaning. Either way, it reveals the aesthetic enchantment for a digital age still grappling with questions concerning ethics, containment, and consequences for genuine social agency.

***Botany Manor*: Containment and Isolation as Scientific Practice**

In contrast to the wider world in *Strange Horticulture*, *Botany Manor* shows how female scientists conducted research, even when isolated and excluded from the scientific community. Instead, *Botany Manor*'s Arabella pursues research invisibly. Likewise, the player never encounters a character sketch. Instead, the character achieves results through actions. Piecing

together the puzzles each plant offers within the domestic space of the main character's ancestral home requires navigating the different names that plants and people take within different contexts. For instance, as the player solves puzzles, a new space becomes available. For one of these puzzles, the initials for the lock to the master bedroom requires the mother's maiden name, not her married name.

Identity becomes ambiguous, then, in this game with its remarkable reproduction of Victorian women's systematic scientific exclusion and, as a result, isolation. One of the narrative's climactic moments features a male professor claiming credit for a new plant discovery, which the player encounters and then pieces together. The professor remains credited, while the actual scientist (Arabella) remains an obscure amateur, barred from the field. While the setting certainly creates an enchanted aesthetic, the narrative's historical accuracy establishes its engagement with documented rather than romanticized Victorian botanical practice. In her feminist analysis of plant aesthetics from the last four centuries, Nazila Jahangir Anbardan carefully illustrates how women participated in natural science, especially through botanical illustration, although they frequently were not credited for their work. Rather, in explaining the relationship between art and science in this time period, Anbardan suggests these women were treated as "tools" or mere "ornaments" to the texts rather than scientists in their own right (57).

Botany Manor shows how this (literal) marginalization, anonymization, and isolation could impact women's scientific work. However, women botanical scientists' and illustrators' reconciliation of the subjective elements and the scientific objectivity clearly shows in their work. For example, Anbardan describes how, scientifically, plants were often illustrated without their natural environments. By contrast, women often resisted this stricture and instead illustrated the plants within their habitats, aligning more with Humboldt's ecosystem theory. Also, although

many women were socially pressured to remain anonymous, Anbardan notes how Anne Rudge received "such esteem during her lifetime that a species of water lily was named after her" (67). Names, then, hold significant weight, a value reflected in the storyline in *Botany Manor*. Several other illustrators also achieved recognition, although, like Beatrix Potter, they may have needed men to intervene in scientific society (69). Famously, Potter's uncle was responsible for promoting her illustrations to the scientific establishment. These illustrations remain so accurate as to continue to remain the standard in many contemporary botanical guides, although she was barred from ever directly addressing the scientists who used her work. Arabella, the main protagonist here, also has a friendly male relative supporting her work, although with a far more depressing outcome. At the end of the game (spoilers!) the resolution scarcely satisfies, although it is hardly surprising. The fictional Arabella's work is never published, but rather than allowing the archive to fade into obscurity, she creates a female scholarly community, converting the manor into a school for natural science.

As representative of the occult archive, *Botany Manor* deploys containment as a means to an end. The core mechanics require absolute environmental precision to solve each plant-based puzzle. Precise timing, wind direction, and even musical tones transform each plant, lending a mystical ritualization to scientific study. The puzzles' representations of literature and art, with some examples including stories, photographs, and illustrations, create magical conditions. Navigating the herbarium as an occult archive within *Botany Manor* allows players to recover the enchanted elements such research inherently contains, compensating for their character's social exclusion through digital wish fulfillment. However, it also reproduces the fantasy that feminine botanical mastery requires complete containment and isolation for safety.

***Potion Craft*: Commodification and Medieval Fantasy**

The last game in this review, *Potion Craft*, employs tropes and binaries creating a cartoon version of the herbarium that nonetheless maintains elements of mystery. With neither the dark aesthetics *Strange Horticulture* employs nor the lush enchantment central to *Botany Manor*, the sepia tones in *Potion Craft* transpose alchemical mystery to a map. The design also invokes medieval illustration, with dull colors and flat perspectives. Operating within this compendium, players become proprietors again, proffering poisons or cures as their customers request. Here, the main mechanic relies on resource management and profit optimization. Predominantly male patrons offer resources and upgrades, although a nature lover and an old witch also make cameo appearances. The player must figure out how to not only create fungible materials for economic exchange, but also how to navigate a vast, obscure, and complicated alchemical map, inching towards discovering new potions through excessive experimentation. Trial and error reveals the means to achieve the effects the customers crave, reducing the herbarium as an occult archive similar to a menu. While *Strange Horticulture* also reduces plants to properties, the plants themselves remain the focus. In *Potion Craft*, the plant becomes simply a means to an end, interchangeable with other, perhaps more effective plants or bases to craft even more powerful potions. Success here rests on remuneration, eliminating to a large extent the nuance and ethical complexities featured in both *Strange Horticulture* and *Botany Manor*.

As a site for negotiating nineteenth-century tensions in a digital media format, *Potion Craft* is a fantasy of medievalism as a Pre-Raphaelite might have imagined, more so than actually medieval, which would have rendered a more enchanted landscape. Instead, *Potion Craft* succeeds as a game predominantly when the player explores the internal landscape of the alchemical map. Using different bases, players can spend ingredients to push known boundaries, replicating how

experimentation results in new discoveries. As an example of what Taylor would call the buffered self, *Potion Craft* lives largely in the mind, making the herbarium mere means to an end. This last game, then, reflects an herbarium where the occult archive only exists to further herbal exploitation. Of course, resource management also makes a strong argument for preservation, but the investment operates within a much different framework, with vastly different stakes and ethical axes. The instrumentalization of enchantment, magic as optimization rather than a relationship with the environment, operates through extraction and mastery in contrast to the mysticism of *Strange Horticulture* or feminine agency in *Botany Manor*.

Conclusion

Rather than transcending historical frameworks, by deploying mechanics where containment, enchantment, and commodification impinge upon the herbarium as an occult archive, these games reveal the persistent tensions inherent in navigating nature, especially a gendered nature. Reflecting societal relationships with nature in the twenty-first century, they offer sites where players can participate in previous historical contexts, navigating nature as both dangerous and domesticated. While some, like *Strange Horticulture* and *Botany Manor* draw on the mystical feminine and marginalized feminine, respectively, others like *Potion Craft* reduce this agency to matters of character costume, serving a commodity culture. Whatever purpose the herbarium serves, the supernatural layer over the natural persists, creating an herbarium that always also operates as an occult archive, with all its many mycelial roots communicating messages either perceived or subconscious. Whether at play, on TikTok, or elsewhere in the digital realm, readers too will also always interact with the herbarium as an occult archive, whether aesthetically, scientifically, or otherwise—with what power, we can only dream.

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Reimagining the Nineteenth Century through Medieval Fantasy: An Orientalist Portrayal in *House of the Dragon*

Review by Safiyya Hosein

The medieval fantasy series *Game of Thrones* (2011-19) became a cultural phenomenon after its debut in 2011. Despite widespread backlash from its large fanbase over the final season, HBO launched a spinoff prequel series titled *House of the Dragon* (2022-), which delves into a civil war within the infamous ruling family, the Targaryens. Although the world is primarily modeled on a medieval European setting, it incorporates elements from the nineteenth century—especially those tied to the British Empire. Most notably, its orientalist aesthetics closely resemble Victorian-era illustrations from *The Arabian Nights*. This review explores the visual legacy of *The Arabian Nights* as a lens for understanding how Victorian-era conceptions of "the East" and empire are integral to the world-building of the *Game of Thrones* universe, as seen through *House of the Dragon*.

Translated by Richard Burton (and others) in the nineteenth century, *The Arabian Nights*—also known as *One Thousand and One Nights*—was often published with elaborate illustrations. Released during the height of British colonial rule in the East, these illustrated editions granted English publishers a sense of authority over Eastern imagery and narratives. Given that these aesthetics have shaped Western representations of the East in popular culture for over a century, *The Arabian Nights* holds a powerful and enduring visual legacy that, as Katherine Bullock and Steven Zhao observe, "remains strong, systemic, and encoded deeply enough into Western culture" (450). This legacy continues to be replicated in contemporary televisual productions such as *House of the Dragon*. While the narratives of Scheherazade were fantastical, Victorian pictorial aesthetics

used to illustrate them often portrayed peoples of the East as "inferior, quaint, exotic, backward, and barbaric Oriental subjects" (Bullock and Zhao 446).

To understand *House of the Dragon*, we first need to contextualize it through *Game of Thrones*, which is based on George R. R. Martin's *A Song of Ice and Fire* (1996-) novels. The HBO series is known for its graphic violence, political intrigue, and fantastical elements, centering on a number of aristocratic families vying for power over the realm of Westeros—a fictional continent modeled largely on medieval Europe, particularly England. Set several hundred years before the events of *Game of Thrones*, *House of the Dragon* traces the rise and fall of the Targaryen dynasty, a family that ruled Westeros for centuries due to their unique ability to control dragons—creatures that serve as a powerful metaphor for modern weaponry within a medieval setting.

As civil war erupts within the Targaryen family—setting dragons against dragons—an emissary of the reigning king, Aegon II, is dispatched to Essos, a region located in the eastern part of this fictional world. In season two, episode eight, titled "The Queen Who Never Was," this emissary, Tyland Lannister, negotiates with the Triarchy, the rulers of three major eastern cities, for assistance from their armada. Securing this fleet is crucial for King Aegon's faction, the Greens, as they attempt to break a naval blockade imposed by the opposing faction, the Blacks, led by one of Aegon's sister's allies. What makes this episode particularly striking are the orientalist elements used to depict the eastern cities, imagery that closely mirrors what Edward Said described as the West's construction of the East as exotic, decadent, and fundamentally "other" (72). The opening scene of Tyland's negotiations is saturated with such tropes: it begins with a strategically placed monkey wandering into a lavishly tented area, evoking a sense of both spectacle and primitivism. Tyland sits on an ornate rug atop the desert floor, facing representatives of the ruling Triarchy, who are adorned in turbans, harem pants, and embroidered vests. These visual cues both reinforce

stereotypical portrayals of what Linda Nochlin calls the "mystical East" (3) and recall the exoticized imagery found in illustrated editions of *The Arabian Nights*. The scene is particularly reminiscent of an illustration from an 1897 edition translated from Burton, featuring artwork by Albert Letchford from the story "Ali Shar and Zumurrud" (Fig. 1). In this image, a group of men sit on the floor, adorned in various types of headwear, surrounded by lavish settings. Both parties are attended to by servants who wave large fans over them, while the Triarchy negotiators assert their dominance through remarks steeped in sensory excess, referencing their tapestries and perfumes. The *mise-en-scène* reproduces the orientalist binary that positions the East as theatrical (Said 63) and indulgent in contrast to the rational, austere, and ultimately superior West (7).

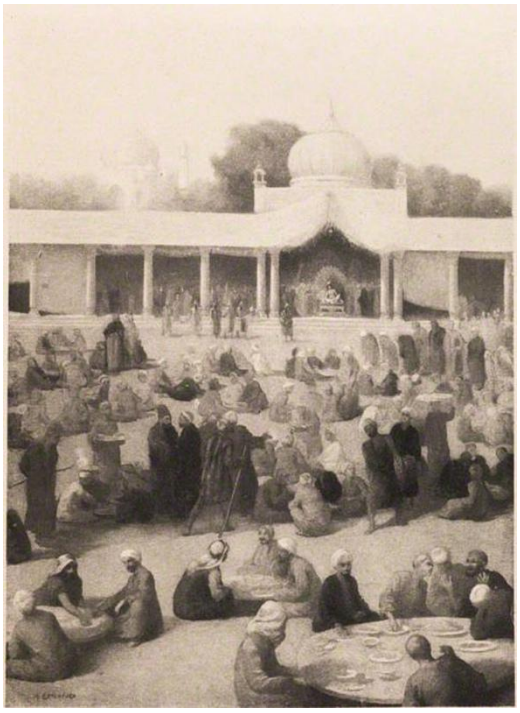

Fig. 1: Albert Letchford, illustration for "Ali Shar and Zumurrud," 1897. In *The Arabian Nights*, translated by Richard Burton, H. S. Nichols, 1897, between 330 and 331.

At the end of the scene, the Triarchy declares that they will assist Tyland if the commander of the fleet, Lohar, agrees to the deal. When Lohar walks into the tent, we realize that he is a woman but is gendered as a male because of his leadership within the Triarchy. As part of the negotiations, Tyland agrees to a mud wrestling match with Lohar. In a later scene, the spectacle unfolds, culminating in Tyland's unexpected victory. Following the match, Lohar jokingly proposes that they celebrate by eating the flesh of their enemies—a comment that visibly terrifies Tyland. Lohar then laughs and dismisses the remark as a joke, a moment that underscores the cultural disconnect and reinforces the scene's performative exoticism. In a later exchange, Lohar

expresses such admiration for Tyland that he offers one of his wives for the purpose of copulation, hoping she might bear Tyland's child. Again, these scenes are layered with orientalist tropes: the first evokes the enduring stereotype of the Eastern "savage" (Said 117), while the second reinforces the image of the East as a site of female subjugation, echoing the harem fantasy and portraying the region as "irredeemably different from, more backward than, and culturally inferior" to the West (Nochlin 9). Lohar's characterization further reinforces this stereotype—though portrayed as male due to his authority and dominance, his identity and cultural role are filtered through a Western gaze that both exoticizes and denigrates at the same time. The depiction is a curious one, as it is likely less about promoting progressive views on gender and tolerance than about reinforcing colonial perceptions of the east as a "feminized" land—a critique found in both Edward Said's work (138) and Mohja Kahf's analysis (8). In Lohar's depiction, eastern leaders are subtly portrayed as less masculine than their Westerosi counterparts, reflecting a medieval worldview in which men were expected to present as male, women as female, and any deviation was deemed unnatural or wrong.

Throughout *House of the Dragon*, the Triarchy is portrayed as a persistent menace, extending even to neighboring cities like Pentos, which evokes Ottoman influences in both clothing and architecture. While not part of Westeros, Pentos is situated close enough to the continent to invoke symbolic connections and cultural allusions. In season one, episode six, "The Princess and the Queen," the exiled Prince Daemon and his family are approached by the Prince of Pentos, who offers them protection and luxury in exchange for the potential use of their dragons should the city come under attack from the Triarchy. Though Pentos is sometimes likened to Mediterranean city-states such as Genoa or Venice, it is also marked by references to spices, slavery, and concubinage. Framed through an orientalist lens, these features position Pentos as yet

another manifestation of the exotic East—sensuous, threatening, and fundamentally "other" to the rational West.

Finally, while *Game of Thrones* and *House of the Dragon* draw heavily from British medieval history, the Targaryen conquest and rule of Westeros, along with Daenerys Targaryen's campaigns in the East, evoke a broader narrative shaped by British imperial ideology. Although the series does not explicitly romanticize the era of British imperialism, it implicitly conveys a civilizational superiority, particularly in its portrayals of cultural contact with groups coded as "other." For instance, the Dothraki are rendered as a violent, nomadic tribe, marked by exoticism and brutality, echoing colonial stereotypes of non-Western peoples. Similarly, the Children of the Forest—depicted as the aboriginal inhabitants of Westeros—mirror Indigenous populations who are nearly extinct by the time that *Game of Thrones* takes place. These representations participate in a familiar imperial narrative structure: one that marginalizes or mythologizes the colonized while centering the legitimacy and dominance of the conquering force.

Overall, the orientalist aesthetics first popularized through nineteenth-century illustrated editions of *The Arabian Nights* play a significant role in the world-building of both *Game of Thrones* and its spinoff series, *House of the Dragon*. At its core, *The Arabian Nights* is a collection of folktales that were translated and lavishly illustrated during the height of British imperialism, shaping Western perceptions of the "Orient" as exotic, decadent, and otherworldly. *House of the Dragon* exemplifies what Abderrahmene Bournane describes as the "ongoing exoticization and perception of the Orient" (236), reimagined through a medieval fantasy lens that subtly evokes a nostalgia for imperial dominance.

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Review by Megan Burke Witzleben

Do people ever fully outgrow the fairy tales of their childhood? Jessica Campbell makes the case that, at least for the Brontës, the answer is a resounding no. While scholars have studied the impact that fairy tales had on their juvenilia for years, Campbell argues that fairy tales influenced the siblings beyond their childhood kingdoms and into the realist fiction of their adulthood. She demonstrates that fairy tales proved to be flexible models upon which they could base complex novels.

Campbell begins chronologically with a historical analysis of the Brontës' exposure to fairy tales in the Haworth parsonage, and she considers their influence on kingdoms and characters in their juvenilia. She continues thematically with Branwell's military-themed writing and Emily's and Anne's poetry. The next section, "Happily Ever After," is the only one to feature a singular text, Charlotte's *Jane Eyre* (1847), because the novel so explicitly references fairy tales. Campbell shifts in the book's second half to stories that draw less directly from fairy tales. "Fairwell to Fairies," for example, considers the "supernatural bride" as the defining trope of *Shirley* (1849) while folklore, rather than recognizable fairy tales, permeates *Wuthering Heights* (1847). She concludes with the question, "What is Real?" with a compelling analysis of Anne Brontë's commitment to showing the realities of brutal households. To the extent that fairy tales influence *Agnes Grey* (1847) and *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* (1848), it is to reveal their complications. Lastly, Campbell loosens the definition of fairy tales to consider how the narrator of *Villette* (1853), Lucy Snow, becomes the enchanting storyteller rather than the subject of a fairy tale. Her

dreamlike sequences reveal her psychological development as she shrouds her fears of Catholicism and spinsterhood through the trope of the nun (200).

Campbell notes in closing that by the end of the nineteenth century, the "Tinker Bell" version of fairies took hold of the popular imagination, displacing a more complex variety once known to the Brontës and their readers. "With all due respect to Barrie," Campbell explains, "I have attempted in this book to conjure a different and older image of fairies and other supernatural creatures as figures of radical uncertainty, not strictly bound by any one association" (206). The older type of fairy tale that was "vital to the Brontës' oeuvre" (208) was "remarkably elastic," often lacking happy endings. They provided authors "toolkits" with which to develop truths too complex to tell through reality alone (207).

The Brontës and the Fairy Tale fulfills its promise of carefully illuminating layers of fairy tales within each of the Brontë siblings' writings. Scholars of fantasy and fairy tales will appreciate her distinctions between the genres of supernatural writing. Campbell meticulously researched the original texts, translating literary fairy tales in *The Thousand and One Nights* and French tales by Marie-Catherine d'Aulnoy and Charles Perrault. She consistently engages with contemporary scholarship to make the case that knowledge of the tales affects readers' understanding of character. Distinguishing between the mentions of fairy tales in *Blackwood's* and print ephemera, she considers the likelihood of the Brontës' encounters with different stories and tropes (21). "My goal," she explains, "is not to argue for specific versions of tales as the most likely sources for the Brontës; rather, I hope to provide a sense of the tapestry of folk- and fairy-tale models available in the popular culture from which the Brontës drew" (22). Her thorough close readings of juvenilia and connections to the *Blackwood's* magazines likely to be found at Haworth trace the proliferation of fairy stories in ephemera and in the era's published works (28). Though mostly concerned with

the plots and prevalence of tales themselves, Campbell also considers the larger imperial context in which they lived. For example, she analyzes how as children, the Brontës modeled Glass Town, one of their fictional worlds, on "The British Settlements in Western Africa" in *Blackwood's* to portray tyranny over Ashanti characters (34-5). This comparison indicates that the children not only read, but absorbed, the imperialist, as well as fantastical, tendencies of their time. In her section on Branwell's poetry, Campbell notes that he tried to hide any influence of fairy tales, but he nonetheless depicts fairies as metonyms for weak or wily women (55). She explains, "In the works of Charlotte and Emily Brontë, the supernatural is consistently endemic to the real world. For Branwell, it is often in mind but always apart—in the mystifying and ultimately incomprehensible opposite sex" (64). Because "Branwell's ideas were the ones on the rise throughout the Victorian period," readers learn about Victorian attitudes through his texts, which otherwise ostensibly cover war and political figures (69).

Citing a long list of critics including Molly Clark Hillard, Nina Auerbach, and many more, Campbell builds on their analyses to argue that as the siblings matured, they did not repeat so much as transform multiple fairy tale references to create tension in their texts. For example, when discussing *Jane Eyre*, she does not choose sides with those arguing that the story follows "Beauty and the Beast" more or less than "Bluebeard." Instead, she argues that the novel reflects both simultaneously, revealing Jane's complex relationship with Rochester as she understands her position with his. Jane constantly shifts in her perception of Rochester as Bluebeard hiding the dead bodies of previous wives (here, Bertha Mason) and the Beast, whose soft affinity with her becomes clear only after time (94-95).

At times, readers of *The Brontës and the Fairy Tale* may wish for a more precise interpretation—how do people read these stories differently by noticing the fairy tale parallels?

Campell suggests that readers notice "the work fairy tales do" (207), and states that "Paying attention to how Brontë interweaves the threads of realism and the supernatural provides new insights into the dual resolutions of the industrial and domestic plots" of *Shirley* (115), but she does not always state the "insight" or quite spell out what "work fairy tales do," other than parallel the plots and characters. Nevertheless, Campbell provides so much evidence of overlapping storytelling that one cannot help but read the novels with fresh eyes. In one of her strongest chapters likening Anne Brontë's Arthur Huntington to "Bluebeard," Campbell makes her point explicit:

> The horrifying fairy-tale union underscores Brontë's exposé of the danger real women face at the hands of their husbands. In other words, subtle evocations of "Bluebeard" throughout the novel, without compromising Brontë's realism, remind the reader that an abusive, alcoholic husband, however aristocratic he may be, is not so different from the murderous fairy-tale husband. (172)

Having painstakingly explored how Anne's Christian moralizing led her to distance herself from overt mentions of fairies, Campbell emphasizes the utility of the trope in making her points. This chapter helps reframe the danger women faced at the hands of their husbands. Women with economic independence have the luxury of marrying whomever. Until then, the real threat of abuse loomed over young brides. Such a warning may still resonate with readers today considering women's options when confronting abusive partners.

Overall, Jessica Campbell has written a compelling examination not only of the prevalence of fairy tales in Victorian print culture, but also of how this impacted the Brontës' literary imaginations. Students of the Brontës should read *The Brontës and the Fairy Tale* to see how even realist novels such as *Shirley* and *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* reflect the richness of figurative fairy

lore. Beyond Brontë enthusiasts, literary historians can benefit from Campbell's thorough research on folklore and fairy tales, both formal literary publications and print ephemera. By the end of the book, Campbell demonstrates that fairy tales and "fantastical traditions" served vital roles in the Brontës' work, and she encourages other scholars to join her consideration of their impact on other aspects of Victorian literature and culture.

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Mould, Tom and Rae Nell Vaughn, editors. *Choctaw Tales: Stories from the Firekeepers*.

UP of Mississippi, 2025. https://www.upress.state.ms.us/Books/C/Choctaw-Tales2

Rev. by Michael S. Martin

The Pearl River—a natural feature that, along with the Nanih Waiya mound in Central Mississippi, prominently features in Choctaw storytelling—straddles the border of Louisiana and Mississippi. At the same time as I was reading *Choctaw Tales: Stories from the Firekeepers*, I drove over a wide and high bridge that straddles the southernmost part of the Pearl River, surrounded by meadows and marshes, and envisioned the history behind this waterway. Several Choctaw stories collected in this volume, including "Manlike Creature," a tale about a benign humanoid "with a tail," have the northern portions of the Pearl River, near Jackson, serve as their setting (137). The stories in the volume foreground the sacred Nanih Waiya mound, the place where Choctaw creation myth says the tribe began. Several such stories, including "The Little People in Nanih Waiya Cave" and "Doors in Nanih Waiya Cave," center on an individual, whether a grandfather or uncle recalled in the story or otherwise, who encounters a parallel world or the infamous "little people" who live in the mound (152-53).

I mention these points on the Pearl River and Nanih Waiya in this review because Southeastern Indigenous placehood and practices are crucial for understanding both the storytellers and collected stories featured within this landmark volume. *Choctaw Tales* was originally published in 2004, but this expanded version is noteworthy both because nearly fifty new stories have been included and the Mississippi Band of Choctaw Indians tribal archivist Rae Nell Vaughn now serves as a co-author along with Ball State University anthropologist Tom Mould. The revisions are centered on, as stated in the preface, "collaboration, recognition, and awareness of what has been present from the start" in the Choctaw storytelling tradition (xviii). Mould is as

"within the tribe" as much as any non-Choctaw could be. Mould, in the introduction, recalls being "settled round the kitchen table," talking to Choctaw storyteller Harley Vaughn, and eating "fried catfish, buttered cabbage, black-eyed peas, and hominy"— all staples of a Southern diet (11). He is even featured as a character in one of the Choctaw stories. Mould lived with these storytellers for years and comes across as a close confidante bordering on being "family." But the process of re-creating these stories is a collaborative effort, spanning decades for this individual volume, and centuries for the Indigenous storytellers acknowledged within individual biographies in the first hundred pages as ethnographic source material. The storytellers featured include still-living members of the Choctaw Nation such as Jessica Miller and four members from the Willis family (Gladys, Hulon, Linda, and Travis), as well as ancient, historical speakers such as nineteenth-century tribal leader Peter B. Pitchylln. Mould and Vaughn lament, in the introduction, that many of the storytellers have recently passed because of COVID or for other reasons.

After a very long, but necessary, prefatory section of nearly one hundred pages, the primary source material, that is, the stories themselves, begins; they are categorized into seven sections. The prefatory section includes, in "Commentary and Context," a discussion of two important facets of Choctaw storytelling in Native language: *shokhannōpa* and *hopáki ikhāna*. *Shokhannōpa* refers to "group[ing] of stories," stories that may be disparate, under one umbrella: "humorous stories and animal tales" (80). Meanwhile, *hopáki ikhāna* can be defined alternately as "*talk of the elders*," "historical legends," or "old stories" (85; italics in original). This Indigenous context for storytelling helps guide the would-be reader into the storytelling and genre distinctions within the seven sections that follow: "Creation Stories and Myths," "Supernatural Legends and Encounters," "Historical Tales" (*hopáki ikhāna)*, "Prophecy," "Jokes and Tall Tales," "Animal Stories," and "Stories in Choctaw." Of particular interest to the modern reader—or at least this modern reader—

is the range of stories featured within the "Supernatural Legends and Encounters" section, which includes "memorate" forms of stories marked by the speaker as having "*personal* encounters with the supernatural" (79; emphasis added).

This story cycle features several malevolent entities that the speaker or someone they know has encountered, or the story of the supernatural being has been heard thirdhand, including one that Jeffie Solomon (1997) recalls of the *Kashikanchak* creature. The *Kashikanchak* is not explicitly described, though it successfully lures children and, in this story, subsequently tries to kill them (128). Other beings, such as the *na los falaya*, are portrayed as humanlike, but with "shriveled" features and "long, pointed ears" (136). The *na los falaya* can mimic human voices and try to bewitch "hunters [while] in the woods, far from their homes" (136). The supernatural creatures section is noteworthy for providing portrayals of pineland topography around Choctaw tribal grounds, for having the same creature (*na los falaya*) featured in multiple tales, and for including creatures also known in European-American folklore, such as the Choctaw version of Bigfoot (*no losa chito*) (148-49). "Supernatural Legends and Encounters," along with the preceding section, "Creation Stories and Myths," feature some of the oldest stories recorded in this collection, with several coming from the nineteenth century. Many of the "Animal Stories" feature either an explanatory motif—"How the Rabbit Got a Short Tail," for instance (238)—or an explicit moral lesson, such as the imperative not to trust someone or something just because of pretty looks, as seen in the "shiny and yellow" cat from "Mouse, Rooster, and Cat" (257). Some of the animals featured in this section, including panthers and wolves, recall a moment in Mississippi environmental history when such predators were part of the Pinelands region. Some of the Choctaw storytellers are from Southern Louisiana, in the Bogue Chitto area (*chitto*, or "big," has Choctaw origination) and Lacombe, which are in the eastern part of the state. As someone who

has camped at Bogue Chitto, hiked the pinewoods there, and heard coyotes howling late at night, I wonder whether these animals are some of the offspring of the ones the Choctaw heard and saw hundreds of years ago.

My only critique of the volume is in the presentation of the stories, which are not precisely ordered chronologically. The editors seem to link the stories by theme (the *no la chito* story cycles, for instance) rather than year of recording, though a chronological order would have provided a better sense of storytelling and subject matter evolution over time. But the value of the volume, both in terms of Choctaw history and Choctaw lived experience in modernity, is astounding and hard to quantify. For instance, many of the stories featured in the "Prophecy" section tell of the advent of technology, whether with cars, electricity, or televisions and phones, but from an Indigenous perspective. In "Cars, Roads, and Changing Values," Odie Mae Anderson recalls, in 1997, a story told by her father and his friend about the time when "brick houses" would be built and "paved" roads expanded—what Anderson suggests is a future vision for an "interstate" (208). The collection, too, acts as both an extension of, and yet also a corrective for, previously-collected Choctaw stories that were done by sympathetic—yet ultimately from an outsider status—White ethnographers such as George E. Lankford.

The book comes across as a textual palimpsest of sorts, with copious amounts of editorial material, including both annotations to the stories and a notes section after the primary source material. Moreover, the annotations offer a sort of history of both Choctaw scholarship in itself, including tribal speeches recorded by nineteenth-century Christian missionaries (310-11), prominent twentieth-century ethnographies, and new animal tales that were part of the learning repertoire of the Bilingual Education for Choctaws of Mississippi (BECOM) (311). One slight problem I encountered with the usability of these annotations is that the chapter in question is

annotated with endnotes, but no corresponding pagination. As a whole, *Choctaw Tales* also extends across Indigenous forms of knowledge, language, and learning outside of, though conversant with, Western practices and beliefs. Vaughn, an important figure in Choctaw culture who previously served as Chief Justice of the Choctaw Supreme Court, records and annotates some of these tales with Mould, too. A final, primary source section retells many of the preceding creation stories and animal tales entirely in Choctaw language. Importantly, proper attribution as well as brief biographical sketches are given for Choctaw elders and tribal members who provided the source material for the recorded folklore. This revised edition should be of significant interest to scholars working in Southeastern Native American Studies, Southern Studies, or Folklore Studies.

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Richmond, Velma Bourgeois. *Nordic Sagas as Children's Literature* : *Victorian and Edwardian Retellings in Words and Pictures*. McFarland, 2022.

https://mcfarlandbooks.com/product/nordic-sagas-as-childrens-literature/

Laurence Roussillon-Constanty

Velma Bourgeois Richmond's *Nordic Sagas as Children Literature: Victorian and Edwardian Retellings in Words and Pictures* (2023) is part of a series of books dedicated to "establish the richness and diversity of Late Victorian and Edwardian children's books that retold literatures of national and ethnic heritage" (1). The title promises to examine the link between Nordic sagas and their numerous revisitations in children's literature. In the introduction, the author writes that her book "establishes an alternative tradition, different in significant ways," (1) and the sheer number of collected texts and variations is ample evidence of her statement.

The book is divided into three parts: "Contexts and Criticisms," "Nordic Sagas as Children's Literature," and "Schoolbooks." Chapter 1, "English Translations," opens with a list of translations into English during the Victorian period and relies on solid academic work such as Andrew Wawn's seminal *The Vikings and the Victorians* (2000) before focusing on several key figures in the translation of Nordic sagas, such as Thomas Percy, Henry Weber (Sir Walter Scott's literary assistant), and Robert Jamieson. It also sets other translators in perspective, such as Samuel Laing, whose translation of *Heimskringla* (1915) became standard and helped to popularize the saga among English readers thanks to its cheap publication by Everyman. Richmond gives a lot of detail but somewhat loses her reader by skipping over genealogical facts about the publication of the various translations and facts about narrative plots. As an example, the story of "The Battle of London Bridge"—an episode in which Olaf Trygveson joins Ethelred to oust the Danes who had fortified it and its illustration by Morris Meredith Wiliams—is mentioned with no reference to its

clearly Pre-Raphaelite inspiration in its resemblance to D. G. Rossetti's medievalist illustrations of Thomas Malory's *Le Morte d'Arthur* (c. 1470). Richmond's long quotes neither help to piece the narratives together nor support her claim that some of the sagas targeted children rather than adults. Transitions are weak and sometimes far too elliptic. For instance, Richmond writes, "Of one hundred sixty-nine sagas, a few were favored for children. Laing's 'Preface' defined Northmen's dominant role" (19). Is that to say that the stories selected for children showed the masculinity or manly power? Later on, Richmond rightly mentions Mary Howitt's *The Literary and Romance of Northern Europe* (1852) and gives lengthy quotes from the book while giving few useful comments on it.

Additionally, the conclusion to the section is a bit of a letdown: "Mary Howitt, translator of Andersen and Scandinavian novels, writer of poems and books about children, was uniquely qualified" (24). That Howitt's "high sentiment was apt for children" (23) also sounds very dismissive, or at least elusive as Richmond does not really address the question of what we mean by "children's literature" (then and now). Another question inadequately explored in the book is why these British authors decided to translate these texts—in other words what translation means as an intellectual and sometimes as a collaborative endeavor at a practical as well as conceptual level.

A case in point is Richmond's discussion of William Morris and Eiríkir Magnússon's *The Saga Library* (1891). Richmond gives lengthy quotes from individual stories but does not mention the context of the unique collaboration process between the two men (which is beautifully analyzed by Richard L. Harris in his 1975 article, "William Morris, Eiríkir Magnússon, and Iceland: A Survey of Correspondence." More annoyingly, Richmond sometimes jumps to conclusions, for instance when she writes that Magnússon and Morris's translation titles suggested women

stemmed from "Pre-Raphaelite obsession with compelling women" (34). Throughout this first part, Richmond moves from one author to the next in chronological order and concludes by giving an overview of the various editors that kept interest for Nordic sagas alive but she does not interpret their meaning or significance in relation to genre, politics, or just readership.

The next chapter, entitled "British Writers Celebrate the North," goes back in time and examines how ideas of Nordic heritage circulated among Romantic writers, starting with Walter Scott, who is seen as a precursor. Next is a short chapter on Felicia Hemans who is seen as "influential but not 'great'" (48). Unfortunately, the paragraph devoted to her writings is so short that one can barely learn from her mention—especially as she appears "sandwiched" between two prominent male figures, Walter Scott and Thomas Carlyle. The next chapters on Carlyle and Bulwer-Lytton are very detailed and descriptive and include overlong quotes from the books with no analysis of the corpus. By comparison, the section dedicated to William Morris with the focus on *Sigurd the Volsung and the Fall of the Niblungs* (1876) is both relevant and stimulating. Similarly, the pages devoted to discussing Henry Rider Haggard's Nordic heritage and sagas and to his friend Rudyard Kipling are fascinating as they show how imagery travelled from one writer to the next, and even from one composer to the next (as Edward Elgar is also mentioned). As one could have expected, J. R. R. Tolkien stands out as a prominent figure as one of the main writers celebrating the North, along with W. H. Auden.

The last chapter in the first part of the book, entitled "American Heritage," is a compendium of American authors who either translated Nordic sagas or offered literary responses to particular themes. This section notably deals with the "Fireside" poets, such as Henry Wadsworth Longfellow and his famous *Tales of a Wayside Inn* (1863), or Ralph Waldo Emerson. The section is very informative and mentions the main anthologies of Nordic poems published in the United

States. It also includes a list of authors who translated or reinterpreted well-known sagas, such as James Russell Lowell or Bayard Taylor. Striking here is the affinity between those American figures and British authors and the Nordic heritage they reclaim in their work. The focus on King Olaf (first promoted by Longfellow's celebration of Saint Olaf in "The Musician's Tale") is foregrounded in the writings of many less prominent American writers mentioned in this section, but Richmond seems here to drift away from the core subject of Nordic Sagas as children's literature.

By contrast, Part II: "Nordic Sagas as Children's Literature," (an odd choice as it replicates the book's title), focuses on world collections and is again a compendium of titles that lists authors of world collections in chronological order, interspersed with black and white illustrations. Although erudite, the section is overly descriptive and fails to sustain the reader's interest. The next section on European collections is far more stimulating as it touches on the intersection between literature and didactics. For instance, when Richmond mentions how the founder of Christian socialism, John Ludlow, introduced medieval stories at the Working Men's College and found epic cycles of Norse-German origin more appealing than Arthurian legends, she is clearly onto something. However, she does not really develop her argument and states that "The Norse was alternative to Mediterranean/Catholic South" (153), which sounds rather obvious. Later on, when the author mentions Andrew and Leonora Lang's *The Book of Romance* (1902), she does mention H. J. Ford's color picture (reproduced in the book in black and white, unfortunately) but only comments that it "closely matched verbal text" (165) without identifying its deliberate references to the Italian Renaissance, such as Botticelli's *Birth of Venus* (1486).

The conclusion to Part II is both sketchy and inconclusive. Finally, the last part in the book is divided into two chapters. Chapter 8, "Wide-Ranging Schoolbooks," considers single-volume

world readers, multi-volume graded readers, and publishers' series. Here, Richmond quotes at length reviews of popular collections, such as *The Junior Temple Reader* (1900), which she sets in context (287). Although her observations are accurate, she downplays the nationalistic tone of some of these titles (for instance, *Tales of Our Forefathers: A Literary and Patriotic Reading Book for School* (1909)) through a lack of in-depth analysis. Finally, Chapter 9 considers the Nordic collections, *Classics for the Kansas Schools*, *Collections*, and *Some Favourite Saga*s.

Richmond's *Nordic Sagas as Children's Literature* successfully traces the Nordic saga literary tradition from the Victorian period to today's documentaries and adventure films by providing a massive number of materials that may provide a solid basis for future research on the topic. It does provide an impressive collection of titles and plot summaries for anyone wishing to explore the fascinating world of Nordic sagas. However, in spite of its breadth and the author's industrious effort at collecting data, the book does not account for the persistent attraction of Nordic sagas in English-speaking literature and does not provide any elaborate answers or critical interpretations of the collected texts and pictures.

Work Cited

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