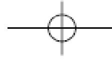

Arthur Rackham's Phrenological Landscape: In-betweens, Goblins, and Femmes Fatales

Leslie Atzmon

The author would like to acknowledge critical comments by Professors Michael Schoenfeldt and John Kucich. The author would also like to thank the Office of Graduate Studies and Research at Eastern Michigan University for its generous support.

Footnotes begin on page 82.

Introduction

In this essay, I will explore several of Rackham's fairy illustrations in J.M. Barrie's *Peter Pan in Kensington Gardens* (1906), in Edgar Allan Poe's book of short stories, *Tales of Mystery and Imagination* (1935), in the Germanic legend *The Ring Series* (1910), and in Christina Rossetti's *Goblin Market* (1933). The illustrations, I will argue, are marked by the effects of late-nineteenth-century psychology. Late nineteenth-century psychology, venturing into the pseudosciences of phrenology and physiognomy as well as exploring notions of the unconscious, produced threatening images both of the grotesque and of enchanting beauty. Each area of psychology reflected and was influenced by the material of the other; each evidenced anxieties and habits of thought that characterized Victorian visual imagery. In this essay, I will address the impact of widespread cultural presumptions about the grotesque and the seductive on Arthur Rackham's fairy images. I also will explore the ways that the unconscious incorporation of anxiety-provoking natural stimuli-such as jagged shapes and forms resembling staring eyes—magnified the perception of threatening visual images in both Victorian physiognomy and in Rackham's fairy illustrations.

Fairy traits, behavior, and origins were serious and valid research subjects in nineteenth-century social science.[1] Fairies captivated the Victorians, who flocked to exhibits of fairy art and lavish productions of plays involving fairies. Rackham's believable but fantastic fairyland helped generate and sustain this fascination. Rackham's popular illustrations played an important role in creating the Victorian image of fairies, simultaneously disclosing hidden implications for the understanding of the Victorian psyche. In this essay, I also will discuss the ways in which Arthur Rackham's fairies manifest, in visual form, both phrenological precepts and Victorian notions of the fearsome animalism of the unconscious mind. Rackham's interpretive imagery gave visual form to such concerns, making an original and important contribution to late nineteenth-century culture.

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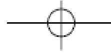


Phrenology, the Unconscious, and Biological Threat Stimuli in Art

Founded by Franz Joseph Gall in the early part of the nineteenth century, phrenology was widely popular, although it got mixed support from the scientific community. The pseudoscience of phrenology—based on a particular version of faculty psychology in which the mind was shaped into distinct faculties that determine human behavior—proposes a materialist interpretation in which the mind is located corporeally in various organs (or sections) in the brain. These organs determine the character of those who possess them—the shape and proportions of the head preordain innate qualities.

Phrenologists also explored the faculties that animals share with humans. These primitive faculties include, among others: Philoprogenitiveness—the love of offspring; concentrativeness—the ability to focus on one object; combativeness—the tendency to self-protection and courage; destructiveness—the desire to meet and overcome obstacles; and secretiveness—the instinct to conceal unbecoming behavior and thoughts. These propensities are most relevant to this study of fairies—who were believed to be aboriginal in the best case, and animistic in the worst—since the propensities specifically target those attributes common to both humans and animals.[2] This group of faculties was well-known among British proponents of phrenology; their physical manifestations were clearly spelled out in phrenological guidelines.

Phrenology operates as a visual medium utilizing detailed anatomical drawings, charts, and diagrams (see fig. 1). Phrenological drawings exhibit the Victorian fascination with the contrast between the normal and the grotesque. These drawings associate positive and negative character traits with a variety of attractive and distasteful outward appearances, respectively.

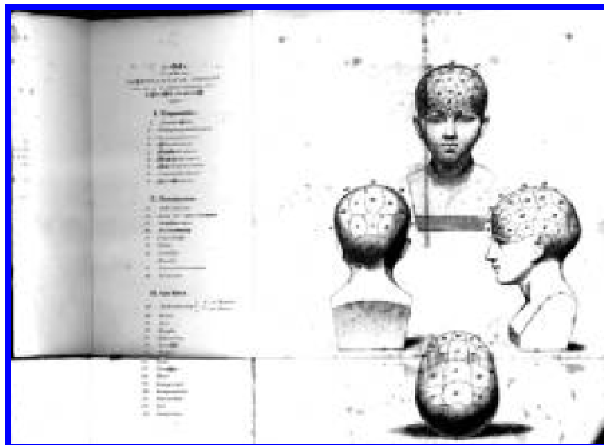
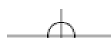
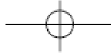


Figure 1
"George Combe's Chart of Phrenological Organs"





Phrenology was believed to be a landscape of the mind that revealed the character within. In his book *The Human Body and Its Connexion with Man*, phrenologist James John Garth Wilkinson describes such a landscape as "inhabited by human natures in a thousand tents, all dwelling according to passions, faculties, and powers."[3] The brain's faculties are concretely linked to a specific visual domain—a panorama of "tents," each with its own complexion.

Rackham's illustrations depict physical types similar to those designated in phrenological charts and descriptions. His scenes are full of characters—amalgams of trees, animals, and humans—displaying various dispositions (see fig 7). The disagreeable qualities demonstrated by his fairies' physical features—for example, fierceness, greed, evil, seductiveness, and callousness—correlate with negative phrenological designations that hint at the beast within the unconscious mind.

Late nineteenth-century notions of the unconscious intermingled with and modified associationist philosophy, which proposed that the mind links ideas in chains of associations, and phrenology, which located psychological traits in areas of the brain. Psychologists pondered connections between conscious thought and unconscious thought. Victorian psychologists were fascinated by the boundaries between the normal and abnormal, which they compared to the border between the conscious, rational mind and the unconscious mind. The unconscious mind, considered an out-of-control beast which could "come out" under the right circumstances, thus took on a sinister quality.[4] The emergence of the hidden beast within was a familiar theme in Victorian culture (in the story *Dr. Jeckyll and Mr. Hyde* written by Robert Louis Stevenson in the late 1800s, for example).[5] In the image "The Kensington Gardens Are in London, Where the King Lives" (see fig. 6), Rackham places a host of imaginary creatures behind the king and underground. That these beings emerge from the dark world "behind" and "underground" is suggestive of the emergence of the beast from the unconscious mind. Their physical appearance, which combines plant, animal, and human features, gives a clue to their psychology.

Figuree 2
"Eye Spots on Moths and Butterflies"
The Biological Origins of Art, Nancy E. Aiken.
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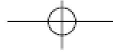
Animalistic or base character could be ascertained, many Victorians believed, from the face. Many so-called base facial features correlate directly with natural anxiety-provoking visual cues. Nancy Aiken, who discusses certain well-established visual triggers of fear and anxiety in *The Biological Origins of Art*, suggests several such natural triggers: false eye spots (see fig. 2) that mimic direct eye contact, pointed versus curved shapes, and the quality of a drawn line.[6] Aiken proposes that art has assimilated anxiety-provoking direct eye contact imagery, sharp-angled shapes, and characteristic line quality for affective purpose. Phrenology and physiognomy have assimilated them as well.

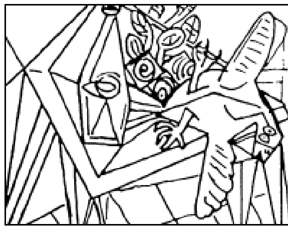
For analysis of the effects of direct eye contact and line quality, Aiken uses psychologist Rudolph Arnheim's technique for com-

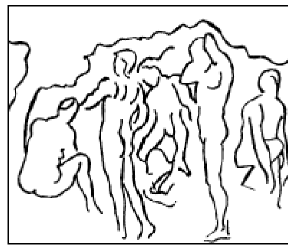


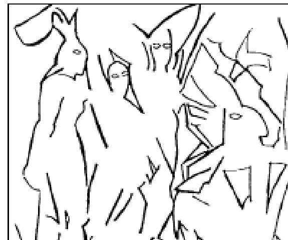
parison of line drawings of two paintings—one by Cezanne, who uses mostly gentle curved line, and one by Picasso, who utilizes sharp, jagged line and mask-like eye shapes (see figs, 3 and 4).[7] Like Picasso's painting, phrenology and physiognomy internalize the unconscious power of anxiety-provoking visuals, including direct eye contact, sharp angles, and line temperament. These visual treatments often translate into intimidating cerebral and facial features. In his essay "Personal Beauty," nineteenth-century psychologist Herbert Spencer compared ugly people to "inferior races," and correlated extremely sharp-angled features with low intelligence:

> If the recession of the forehead, protuberance of the jaws, and largeness of the cheekbones, three leading elements of ugliness, are demonstrably indicative of mental inferiority-if such other facial defects as great width between the eyes, flatness of the nose spreading of the alae, front ward opening of the nostrils, length of the mouth, and largeness of the lips, are habitually associated with these, and disappear along with them as intelligence increases, both in the race and in the individual, is it not a fair inference that all such faulty trials of feature signify deficiencies of mind?[8]

Sharp, protruding facial features signified not only lack of intelligence, but aggressive and destructive temperament. In Rackham's illustrations, round, bulging eyes, convex faces, prominent noses and chins, and low facial angles characterize fairies of all ilks (with the exception of seductive females). Jagged lines that trace grotesque features—a hybrid of the human and the repugnant—confirm the brutish nature of his fairies.







Figures 3 and 4
"Line drawings of Paintings by Cézanne and Picasso Depicting Line Quality"
The Biological Origins of Art, Nancy E. Aiken.
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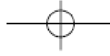
Arthur Rackham's Fairies

The best Rackham illustrations are conceptually suggestive—facial expressions, gestures, and compositions are "loaded" with symbolism and with hidden and obvious implications. Rackham brings this about by using exaggerated facial characteristics phrenologists (and physiognomists) attribute to negative behavior such as brutish sexuality and violence. His fairy illustrations combine familiar human physical traits with repugnant, exaggerated renditions of the human face and form or with animal features. In his landscape compositions, trees become grotesque and frightening animals. Such combinations grip our emotions; we interpret an image as grotesque when we perceive it as a mixture of the normative and the loathsome. Admixtures of the typical human form and the grotesque renditions of it strike a chord in the human psyche because we relate to the familiar aspects and we recoil in horror from their deformities. Rackham's complex and varied compositions contribute to the suggestive symbolism that invigorates his work. His line quality, jagged and angular in anxiety-ridden environments, adds intensity to his illustrations.



At the same time, Rackham's renderings—fortified by twisted notions of Darwinian evolution in which humans evolve from apes—hint at the beast within the unconscious mind. To Victorians, the beast represented not just the grotesque, animal portion of the self, but specifically the animalistic libido. Rackham's illustrations give form, visually and conceptually, to the threat that grotesque features and seductive beauty pose to Victorian culture. Rackham visually merged an abundant and surprising variety of human and animal (or plant) traits. Such imaginative hybrids were a consistent feature of his fairy illustrations. "Rackham's world" burgeoned from one part individual imagination and one part Victorian world view. His vision is colored by prevailing presumptions about nature.

Rackham's nephew, Walter Starkie, gives some insights into the inner workings of Rackham's imaginary fairy world that were based on accepted notions of fairy tradition. Starkie describes Rackham's imaginary symbiotic relationship among fairies, animals, and trees; in this relationship, his trees become animals which are milked by fairies for their sap.

> He would make me gaze fixedly at one of the majestic trees with massive trunk...He would say that under the roots of that tree the little men had their dinner and churned the butter they extracted from the sap of the tree. He would also make me see queer animals and birds in the branches of the tree and a little magic door below the trunk, which was the entrance to Fairyland. He used to tell me stories of the primitive religion of man which, in his opinion, was the cult of the tree...[9]

Rackham's narratives were generated from a deep visual and imaginative engagement with the world. His unique concepts, spurred by his view of nature, culminated in animistic notions of the supernatural. According to Rackham, a primitive religion is practiced by fairies who live within trees and milk them for butter.

Such a view has its basis in notions of fairies "clearly derived from animistic perceptions of nature" and centuries of ideas regarding fairies inhabiting trees and their love of milk.[10] Tree fairies often did worse damage than stealing milk. Particularly striking in this context are Rackham's varieties of threatening, anthropomorphic trees. Victorianist Carole Silver describes the spirits that haunt these trees as extremely threatening.[11] Rackham's tree illustrations capture this grotesque horror in a powerful and unique way. The English periodical *The Outlook* described Rackham's anthropomorphic tree illustrations from *A Midsummer Night's Dream* (see fig. 5) as: "a Rackham tree; one of those trees, gnarled and black and twisted ...appearing as trees that only one man has ever perceived and drawn...." [12] In the image "Come, Now a Roundel," a gnarled and twisted tree roots in and draws sustenance from a so-called "fairy ring" or ring of mushrooms. From its branches, the tree exudes

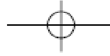
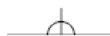
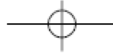


Figure 5
"Come, now a roundel" from Shakespeare's *A Midsummer Night's Dream*
© Courtesy of the estate of Arthur Rackham/ The Bridgeman Art Library.

fairies who ostensibly haunt the tree—in fact, it is difficult to say where tree ends and fairy begins.

Rackham's imagery integrates cultural precepts into a believable fantasy world visually rendered in a provocative manner. His work draws conceptual power from combinations of accepted beliefs and suggestive imaginary scenarios; it draws visual power from his novel juxtapositions, of human and animal, familiar and grotesque, repugnant and beautiful. In Rackham's work fay, flora, and fauna merge—to produce what I call "in-betweens"—in an array that forges a phrenological landscape. In this landscape individual traits, striking on their own, are modified by an illustrative environment that insists on perceptual transitions between the shape of the parts and the design of the whole.





In-betweens

Rackham's hybrid characters not only draw power from their compositional environments, but are themselves visually and conceptually complex. In *Peter Pan in Kensington Gardens*, the young narrator David tells the story of one-week-old Peter Pan's adventures in Kensington Gardens. Peter is halfway evolved from a bird to a boy, and can still fly merely because he has faith that he is able to do so. When he realizes that he is part human, he loses his ability to fly; Peter must then consult with the fairies that inhabit the park. Peter, who is accepted because he remains part animal, is our guide to the fairies. In *Peter Pan in Kensington Gardens.* Rackham portrays a realistic fantasy world—a world of in-betweens, where the commonplace morphs with the deformed—in which birds and fairies converse, and trees come to chat. In the illustration "The Kensington Gardens Are in London, Where the King Lives," (see fig. 6) Rackham presents an imaginative version of Barrie's take on Darwinian

Figure 6
"The Kensington Gardens are in London, where the King lives" from J.M. Barrie's *Peter Pan in Kensington Gardens*
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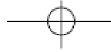
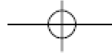


Figure 7
"White and gold Lizzie stood" from Christina Rossetti's *Goblin Market*
©) Courtesy of the estate of Arthur Rackham/ The Bridgeman Art Library.

evolution in which birds, like Peter, become baby boys and girls, and kings become zoological specimens. In this image, the fairies emerge from the tree in a bristling mass, clinging to the tree trunk and roots. It is almost as if the tree gives birth to a clutch of fairies, some of whom cling to its trunk as newborn infants cling to their mother. Several fairies have limbs that mimic the tree's branches and their gesture exactly matches that of the tree. An anthropomorphic tree close to the fence tips his garland to the king in very human fashion, and the king responds in kind. The boundaries among fairy, tree, and human remain indistinct—trees behave like humans, and fairies behave like trees. Rackham elaborates on Barrie's idea that Kensington Gardens "is where the birds are born who afterwards become baby boys and girls," effectively creating a realistic but ethereal world in which creatures aren't always what they appear to be, and where in-betweens are plausible.

In-betweens also characterize the illustration "White and Gold Lizzie Stood" from *Goblin Market* by Christina Rosetti (see fig. 7). In *Goblin Market*, two sisters are tantalized by the forbidden fruit offered by a band of goblin men. Laura is tempted and succumbs, but ultimately is rescued by Lizzie. Lizzie exacts retribution for her sister's capture by refusing to be tempted, thereby vanquishing the goblins. The illustration "White and Gold Lizzie Stood" depicts the



goblins' intoxicating temptation and Lizzie's stalwart fortitude. Rackham goes to all lengths to blur boundaries between animal and human. Some goblins are mostly animal with subtle human nuances. Two goblins at the bottom right resemble a cat and a rat, respectively. However, the cat's sneer is more human than feline, the rat's long nose and beady eyes are exaggerations of the nose and eyes of the other, more human, goblins in the image. Another of the goblins on the left side of the image looks like a werewolf, his teeth fang-like and his nose flat against his face. Yet another goblin who offers fruit is green with a large beak. His hand is webbed like a duck's. He resembles a vulture until one notices a grotesque smile below his beak. The smile anamorphically transforms the beak into a large hooked nose, which again is an exaggeration of the hooked nose of the fairy directly across from him in the image.

This anamorphosis—a normal image that looks distorted when viewed through a special instrument or perspectival angle—compels the viewer to function as distorting instrument. These unexpected distortions expand the variety of morphing goblin heads and shifting facial expressions, and help fashion a phrenological landscape blanketed with horror.

The Phrenological Landscape

The visual axis oscillates between the parts and the whole, between the phrenological traits of the characters and the cumulative vision in the illustration "A Band of Workmen Who Were Sawing Down a Toadstool, Rushed Away, Leaving their Tools Behind Them" from *Peter Pan in Kensington Gardens* (see fig. 8). All the fairies have low, sharp-angled foreheads, which signify both little intelligence and

Figure 8
"A Band of workmen who were sawing down a toadstool, rushed away, leaving their tools behind them" from J.M. Barrie's *Peter Pan in Kensington Gardens*
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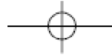

small phrenological organs of Veneration and Benevolence. This combination of physical traits precludes devotedness and empathy for others, respectively. When small organs of Veneration and Benevolence are overcome by organs of Combativeness and Destructiveness, as they are in this case, "cruelty," according to phrenologist Combe, "may result." The fairy in the middle of the composition has an enormous portion of his skull above his ears, therefore his organs of Combativeness and Destructiveness are extremely large. Overactive Combativeness, according to Combe, "inspires with the love of contention of its own sake; and pleasure may be felt in disputation or in fighting." He says of Destructiveness, "The organ is conspicuous in the heads of...persons habitually delighting in cruelty." [13] These gnomes' facial structures—gaunt, skull-like, and angular, with masculine features to excess—match nineteenth-century American artist and physician William Rimmer's debased types from his depictive book *Art Anatomy* (see fig. 9).[14] The gnomes' eyes are disconcerting, too. The fairy in the middle of the composition has eyes that are far set, oval, and lizard-like. The two fairies in front of him have bulging oval eyes with prominent dark pupils that resemble eyespots. Although these fairies flee in fright rather than attack, their eyes range from repulsive to unnerving in appearance.

These fairy characters dovetail with their environment—Rackham's overall composition. In this image, the shapes of the fairies' faces and bodies mesh with the shapes of the toadstools and trees. The toadstool illustrations look like bumpy, bald heads—the gnomes are bald as well-rendered in such an engaging and vital fashion that the viewer can practically "feel" the bumps. In the greater image, the shapes of toadstools and gnomes resemble lumps on a landscape surface (their varied expressions and skull shapes suggest a strong dose of destructiveness or combativeness, and a missing capacity for veneration or benevolence). These jagged-featured gnomes fearfully scuttle away through a landscape replete with sharp angles. The angular shapes point in all directions, leaving the viewer anxious about finding a visual way out of the composition around sharp rocks, thorns, and bony fingers.

Rackham cultivates this anxiety in the image "They Will Certainly Mischief You" (see fig. 10) from *Peter Pan in Kensington Gardens*. In this illustration, a little girl is caught in sharp thorns and held by bony goblin fingers. Two impish male fairies (and a tree with claw-like branches) yank on her clothes—this image is typical of popular stories about trees inhabited by destructive fairies. The fairies' eyes suggest their dark side—they bulge unattractively and are oval with large, dark pupils. Just as disturbing, the drawn line cuts a multitude of sharp angles that make up the faces and bodies of the fairies and the tree which resemble a spider's web. Rackham incorporates jagged curves peppered with small, sharp thorns in the tree branches which instill disconcerting anxiety in the viewer. The

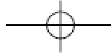

Figure 9
"Rimmer's debased types" from *Art Anatomy*

Figure 10
"They will certainly mischief you" from J.M. Barrie's *Peter Pan in Kensington Gardens*
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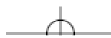

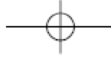

composition meshes with the physiognomic expression of the fairies' phrenological traits, and the physical features of the fairies intertwine with the threatening landscape and anxious line. All these coalesce to create a sense of wickedness in the illustration.

Goblins and Dwarfs

More frightening than these little tree fairies are primitive, animalistic goblins. Poe's *Tales of Mystery and Imagination*, a book of short horror stories, begins with a justificatory essay that lobbies for a phrenological organ called Perverseness. Perverseness, according to Poe, "is a radical, a primitive impulse—elementary." Perverse indeed is *Hop-Frog*, the story of a dwarf who, when mistreated by the king, tricks him and his seven ministers into dressing up as orangutans, trusses them up, and burns them alive. At first, Rackham was concerned that he wasn't up to the task, that his images wouldn't be grotesque enough. Rackham admitted that his illustrations for *Tales of Mystery and Imagination* were "so horrible I was beginning to frighten myself." [15] Rackham was understandably frightened by images portraying behavior so cruel as to be unimaginable—even for a dwarf (Victorian dwarfs, real and supernatural, were considered brutish and crude). We recognize Hop-Frog's behavior. Hop-Frog is acting human. Premeditated cruelty for cruelty's sake, the

Figure 11
"Tripetta advanced to the monarch's seat, and, falling on her knees before him, implored him to spare her friend" from E.A. Poe's *Tales of Mystery and Imagination*.
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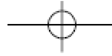


Figure 12
"Rimmer's cunning, rapacious, treacherous type" from *Art Anatomy*.

Figure 13
"Rimmer's coarse-featured, lustful, gluttonous type" from *Art Anatomy*.

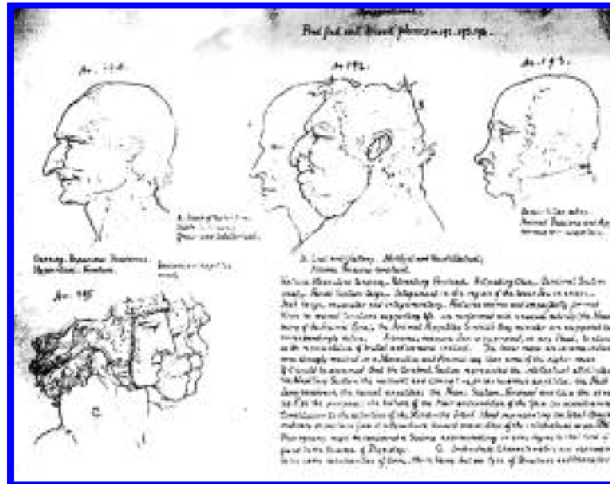


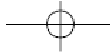
Figure1 4
A black and white illustration of Hop-Frog" from E.A. Poe's *Tales of Mystery and Imagination*. © Courtesy of the estate of Arthur Rackham/ The Bridgeman Art Library.

sort only humans are capable of, verifies that people behave worse than either supernatural dwarfs or animals do. The beast that is the unconscious mind, then, demands a combination of bestial savagery and the human ability to conceptualize.

Rackham gave Hop-Frog the phrenological face of evil. In the illustration "Tripetta Advanced to the Monarch's Seat, and, Falling on Her Knees Before Him, Implored Him to Spare Her Friend" (see fig. 11), Hop-Frog has bulging oval eyes, high cheekbones, a large and grotesque nose, snarling lips, a protruding chin, and a low forehead that slopes back at a steep angle. Rackham has drawn him as the cunning, rapacious, treacherous type described in *Rimmer's Art Anatomy* (see fig. 12). Incidentally, the king and his ministers resemble the type who exhibit these traits: "Lust and gluttony; mirthful and unintellectual; animal passions constant" (See fig. 13). A black and white illustration (see fig. 14) shows Hop-Frog's skull wide above the ears, which indicates large organs of combativeness and destructiveness. The black-and-white illustration is criss-crossed with sharp angles that seem to point like an arrow to the image of Hop-Frog. He is drawn from a series of sharp angles which focus the viewer's eyes onto his face. Here, one finds thick, short lines angled anxiously from his nose backward. His expression is that of a wild beast. These designations are augmented by a deep-rooted fear of dwarf animalism. As Silver explains:

> throughout the Victorian period, dwarfs...had been conflated with each other and equated with goblins (a generic name for small hostile, unattractive, grotesque, and almost exclusively male supernatural creatures) and thus with malice and evil...they were voracious in their sexual appetites and bestial in their behavior.[16]

Hop-Frog the beast takes the devil's work into his own hands and gleefully exacts fiery retribution.



Although we do not get an opportunity to observe the "voracious sexual appetite" typical of goblins in Hop-Frog, the illustrations for Christina Rossetti's *Goblin Market* explore this fully. Because there are no females among them, goblins must kidnap human women. In the illustration "White and Gold Lizzie Stood" (see fig. 7), Rackham shows Lizzie enticed by goblins who swarm over her like insects and claw at her body. The implications are both sexual and ruinous—if she succumbs, she will ultimately die. The luscious fruit they peddle conceals from Lizzie a grotesque array of evil intentions which are expressed in their demeanor. At the very center of the image is a second rat. Both cat and rats have very wide skulls near their ears, which indicate large organs of Destructiveness and Secretiveness. These three, who offer Lizzie fruit, are intent on tempting her to taste her own destruction. This bird-goblin has similar physical characteristics to Rimmer's coarse-featured, lustful, gluttonous type (see fig. 13). He, too, manifests large organs of Destructiveness and Secretiveness. Combe explains that too great an endowment of Secretiveness, "when not regulated by strong intellect, and moral sentiments, produces abuses. The individual then mistakes cunning for prudence and ability...and he may even be led to practice lying, duplicity, and deceit." [17]

Right next to Lizzie in the center of the illustration, a more human-looking goblin offers Lizzie fruit both down over her shoulder (juice runs down her chest) and up by her waist, pointing directly to her bare shoulder and full breast. The fruits near her waist that the leering goblin fondles are suggestive of breasts; here is the voracious goblin sexual appetite.[18] All the goblins in this illustration are more or less animalistic. What is interesting about the specific goblin that assaults Lizzie—he is the most human-looking of the bunch—is the uncanny juxtaposition of animal features with human ones. What makes him Rackham's most effective choice for a rapist is that he is simultaneously human enough to allow the viewer to imagine the act, and animalistic enough to make the act unimaginably horrible. The fleshy fruit creates a plant/human in-between that suggests cannibalism as well. The viewer is not sure whether the goblin intends to rape Lizzie or eat her.

Femmes Fatales

In contrast to these two sisters, the youthful female fairy in the illustration "The Fairies Are Exquisite Dancers" (see fig. 15) is temptress rather than tempted. Female fairies are animals under cover. Graceful and lovely features belie their immense sexual appetite, accompanied by the fairy propensity to bring ruin to humans who cross their paths. The beast within expressed itself openly in fairies. Silver explains the Victorian point of view: "women were closer to 'nature,' less rational and more instinctual, hence more prone to regress to the beast within."[19]

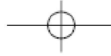


Figure 15 (Left)
"The fairies are exquisite dancers" from J.M. Barrie's *Peter Pan in Kensington Gardens*.
© Courtesy of the estate of Arthur Rackham/ The Bridgeman Art Library.

Figure 16 (Right)
"Rimmer's ideal female facial characteristics" from *Art Anatomy*.

Alluring female fairies functioned as femmes fatales, impossible to domesticate and eager to destroy human males. Such fairies employ their beauty for destructive ends. Perfect human female beauty, discussed at length by Victorian psychologists and in phrenological and physiognomic texts, was, of necessity, interwoven with proper female behavior: sexual virtue, placidity, and domesticity. Beautiful fairies, more base and animistic, lack these qualities and therefore pose a threat to the men they tempt—a threat that stirs up a pernicious fear of female power. Silver cites Barbara Leavey's recent book *In Search of the Swan Maiden*:

> the [fairy] female beauty is...often exposed as a monster...Not purely human, not purely animal, she can be perceived as monstrous and frightening because she is able to call up forces civilized women have repressed and can no longer call on...overt bestiality and blatant sexuality.[20]

Victorians both were titillated and terrified by blatant sexuality. Female fairies, primitive and highly sexed, served as a psychic release valve for both unconscious sexual anxiety and tantalizing erotic fantasy. The dancing fairy in "The Fairies Are Exquisite Dancers" is seductively lovely. Phrenologically, she has Rimmer's ideal female facial characteristics; round head, aquiline nose, concave lips (see fig. 16). However, her hair, which flies out behind her as she dances, prevents the viewer from assessing her organs of Philoprogenitiveness and Concentrativeness are organs that, when large, accentuate a woman's domestic side. Her domesticity is in doubt and her sexuality is suspect. The curved, sensual drawn line of her face and figure lull the viewer and obscure her sexual hunger. The fairy's clothes are translucent and the viewer can see her body underneath, a tantalizing erotic overture. A spider dances behind the fairy, in almost the exact pose. Her web lies underneath the two

10 Atzmon 11/8/02 7:44 PM Page 79

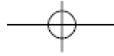
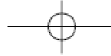


Figure 17
"The Rhine-Maidens obtain possession of the ring and bear it off in triumph" from Richard Wagner's *The Rhinegold and the Valkyrie.*
© Courtesy of the estate of Arthur Rackham/ The Bridgeman Art Library.



dancers, waiting to ensnare a victim. Grasses point upwards to the spider and to the fairy's legs and crotch, which add to the eroticism of the illustration.

Even more erotic is the illustration "The Rhine-Maidens Obtain Possession of the Ring and Bear It Off in Triumph" from Richard Wagner's *The Rhinegold and the Valkyrie* (see fig. 17). This is Rackham at his most sexually suggestive. Two nude water nymphs tease the elf Alberich while they battle him for the possession of the ring—one restrains him from behind and the other from the front—in a tussle that has strong sexual overtones. They appear to be thoroughly enjoying themselves. The third Rhine-Maiden gleefully holds up the ring, exposing a sinuous body with full breasts, long legs and a barely concealed pubic area. Their faces are perfectly beautiful, matching Rimmer's designation of well-balanced female features. Victorian "ladies" whose sexuality had been "civilized" would never be portrayed in this fashion; however, fairies, with their primitive impulses, could. This image functions as soft-core pornography—it stirs up common male sexual fantasies, including one man together with several women. Male fear of female sexual power, represented by the femme fatales, is a turnabout for male anxiety about male sexual fantasies. Victorian culture projected the sexual beast hidden within the male unconscious onto female fairies.

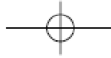
Conclusion

In his 1866 book, *The Gay Science,* writer Eneas Sweetland Dallas suggests that unconscious fantasy is an "automatic action of the mind present in all mental activity" and compares it to an invisible, "tricksy" fairy:

> The hidden efficacy of our thoughts, their prodigious power of working in the dark and helping us underhand, can be compared to that of the lubber-fiend who toils for us when we are asleep or when we are not working... Our backs are turned and it is done in a trice, or we awake in the morning and find that it has been wrought in the night... We have such a fairy in our thoughts, a willing but unknown and tricksy worker...[21]

Dallas contrasts the light and dark character of conscious and unconscious thought, respectively. Dallas's fairy is a hidden, underhanded fay who only appears when it is dark. Rackham's fairies represent the unconscious—the unknown mind that lurks in the dark recesses of human animalism, waiting for an opportunity to rear its ugly head.

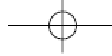
The crude, animalistic, and even sexually charged traits assigned to "others," such as the "lower" races and fairies, were meshed with their assigned physical characteristics. The soothing, sinuous features attached to female fairies hid an overcharged



sexual appetite, while the male fairies were pictured as grotesque admixtures of man and beast. Perceptions of these physical characteristics—which can be correlated with natural anxiety-provoking stimuli such as jagged lines and eye spots—found their way into negative phrenological and physiognomic designations, into cultural stereotypes, and into Rackham's illustration.

Victorian psychologists searched for and formulated explanations of behavior which tended either to normalize or to pathologize. This "black-or-white" method of categorization produced pervasive images of abnormal animalistic behavior and grotesque appearance that were, in turn, codified by the tenets of phrenology and the psychology of the unconscious. Rackham's work was not immune to these influences. He was both a conduit of cultural mores and a creator of them. The hue and spirit of Rackham's work had a tremendous impact on late nineteenth-century and twentieth-century conceptions of Fairyland. At the same time, common Victorian beliefs about animalistic "primitives" are boldly suggested in the narrative of Rackham's compositions in a number of ways. Animalism also is inferred by images of fairies with unsavory cranial and facial features and by seductive-looking female fairies. Compositions replete with jagged lines drawn with sharp angles stimulate subliminal anxiety in Rackham's imagery. Phrenology and notions of the unconscious imbue his fairy illustrations with narratives that express certain fears and anxieties pervading the Victorian psyche.

Rackham's biographers have examined both his style and his creative motivations at length. There is no analysis, however, of the ways in which Rackham's illustrations reflect Victorian culture. This deficiency is due to prescribed methodologies of visual analysis-visual analysis of illustration tends to focus on artistic influences, style, and close reading of symbolism, and to ignore the greater cultural context of the work. Exploring an illustration's cultural context reveals the limitations of a purely visual approach. Cultural analysis of an illustration divulges the greater narrative quality of the image, allowing the embedded messages of a culture to emerge. One could easily spend long stretches of time engrossed in the conceptual content of the scenes in Rackham's fairy illustrations. Rackham's imagery lends itself to close reading and intense visual scrutiny. His illustrations stand on their own as cultural narrative, at least as powerful and eloquent as the text they accompany.



1 Carole G. Silver, *Strange and Secret Peoples: Fairies and Victorian Consciousness* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), 33–57.

2 Silver, *Strange and Secret Peoples.*

3 James John Garth Wilkinson, *The Human Body and Its Connexion with Man*, (Philadelphia, Lippincott, Grambo and Co., 1851), 22.

4 Nineteenth-century psychologist Frederick Myers describes a contemporary case study in which this disturbing side of a boy's personality emerges:

"Louis V. began life (in 1863) as the neglected child of a turbulent mother. He was sent to a reformatory at ten years old, and there showed himself, as he has always done...quiet, well-behaved, and obedient. Then, at fourteen years old, he had a great fright from a viper—a fright which threw him off his balance and started the series of psychical oscillations on which he has been tossed ever since... His character became violent, greedy, and quarrelsome...He is constantly haranguing anyone who will listen to him, abusing his physicians, or preaching with a *monkey-like* impudence rather than with reasoned clearness...." (Frederick W. H. Myers, "Multiplex Personality," (1886) in Jenny Bourne Taylor and Sally Shuttleworth, eds., *Embodied Selves: An Anthology of Psychological Texts 1830–1890* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1998), 134.)

Italics are my emphasis.

The abnormal Louis V. is monkey-like; his unconscious self—his dark, bestial side—has emerged to overtake his rational side.

5 Interestingly, it was a fearful reaction to a frightening animal itself that brought out the savage in Louis V.

6 Eye spots, which resemble a fixed and direct stare, are threatening to a variety of animal species. In particular, such anxiety may be provoked by portraits—which have a strong focus on the eyes—and masks—in which exaggerated eyes are associated with magical intent.

7 "The composition or internal form is very similar. However, the emotions evoked by the two paintings are very different because of the treatment or the shapes chosen to illustrate the women...the Picasso...faces are depicted as masks... and their bodies are drawn with pointed shapes....the emotional effect evoked by the Picasso can still be described as anxiousness or uneasiness....Their pointed shapes may trigger an emotional response on the fear continuum; their eyes...very likely trigger an emotional response on the fear continuum." (Nancy Aiken, *The Biological Origins of Art* (Westport, CT: Praeger Publishers, 1998), 118.)

It is surprising that Aiken neglects to mention shapes in the Picassos that resemble eyespots. Interestingly, the anxiety-provoking mask-like faces and jagged shapes reflect the primitivism Picasso embraced—primitivism Victorians associated with animism. Picasso employs subliminal correlations among these triggers, animism, and anxiety to produce a reaction in the viewer.

8 Herbert Spencer, *The Haythorne Papers* No. VIII, Personal Beauty," *Leader* 5 (1854): 356–7.

9 Walter Starkie quoted in James Hamilton, *Arthur Rackham* (New York: Arcade Publishing, 1990), 72.

10 Silver, *Strange and Secret Peoples*, 44–45.

Scholar Lewis Spence explains the connection among fairies, trees, and milk:

"In all British countries, fairies are regarded as great thieves of milk. Indeed one of their chief haunts is the dairy...it was believed that fairies took away cows at night in order to milk them, and sent them back in the morning...[There is a] legend in the Hebrides which tells how a fairy once a year issued from a tree to distribute 'the milk of wisdom' to the women of the district."

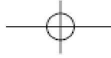
(Lewis Spence, *The Fairy Tradition in Britain* (London: Rider and Company, 1948), 215, 321.)

Milk, then, sustains not only the rudimentary needs of infants, but those of their primitive fairy counterparts as well.

11 "The annir-choille...haunted the woods and snared men...One group of two thorn trees and a boartree...'is guarded by three malevolent demons who, after dark, haunt that stretch of the road... ' Passersby...have had their arms grabbed with marks to show for it, heard inhuman laughs 'and even caught glimpses of dim and horribly misshapen figures.' Others passing hostile trees have sensed from them 'feelings of vicious, bitter evil...' Hatred of humans literally emanated from their branches." (Silver, *Strange and Secret Peoples*, 151–152.)

12 *The Outlook* (11/21/08) as quoted in James Hamilton, *Arthur Rackham* (New York: Arcade Publishing, 1990), 170.

13 George Combe, *Elements of Phrenology* (Edinburgh: John Anderson, Jr., 1824).



14 "The figures] exhibit those features that the *Art Anatomy* regularly associates with diminished mental and moral capacity...convex face, retreating forehead, Roman nose, and prominent chin all belong to the aggressive or conquering races.

Rimmer linked a low facial angle not only to impoverished intellectual and moral faculties, but also to powerful Combativeness and Destructiveness." (Charles Colbert, *A Measure of Perfection: Phrenology and the Fine Arts in America* (Chapel Hill, NC: The University of North Carolina Press, 1997), 106.)

15 Arthur Rackham as quoted in James Hamilton, *Arthur Rackham* (New York: Arcade Publishing, 1990), 153.

16 Silver, *Strange and Secret Peoples*, 117.

17 Combe, *Elements of Phrenology*, 47.

18 "What marks...Rossetti's goblin men as particularly threatening...is their grotesque materiality; their physical ludicrousness combined with their 'primitive' sexuality. Their assaults on women are rapes; perceived as disgusting phallic figures, they suggest the grotesquerie of the erotic...And all are depicted as subhuman; that they are bestial and primitive is suggested by their characteristic hairiness as well as by their explicitly animal features." (Silver, *Strange and Secret Peoples*, 128.)

19 Ibid., 100.

20 Ibid., 100.

21 Eneas Sweetland Dallas "On Imagination" from *The Gay Science* (1866). In *Embodied Selves: An Anthology of Psychological Tests in 1830–1890*, Jenny Bourned Taylor and Sally Shuttleworth, eds., (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1998), 92.