

Molly Clark Hillard. *Spellbound: The Fairy Tale and the Victorians*.

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In her book *Spellbound: The Fairy Tale and the Victorians* Molly Clark Hillard explores the relationship that the Victorians had with the fairy-tale genre, and successfully captures the complexity inherent in that relationship. On the one hand, fairy tales were often disregarded as childish and insignificant; the genre was, as J. R. R. Tolkien once suggested, “relegated to the playroom.”¹ Paradoxically, at the same time as they were pushed aside, fairy tales were also integral to Victorian culture and influenced key literary works in significant ways. Indeed, as Hillard argues, “fairy tales contributed significantly to the language and images of material, industrial England” (1).

Hillard’s study adheres to a relatively recent trend in fairy-tale studies: the socio-historical approach. From the late twentieth century onwards, fairy-tale studies have tended to view tales within their specific historical and cultural contexts, thus largely abandoning earlier methodologies that examined the fairy tale in a vacuum. Such older methodologies, often psychoanalytic in nature, have frequently viewed fairy tales as universal narratives that exist independently of time and space. With its synthesis of textual analysis and historical investigation, *Spellbound* is firmly rooted in newer socio-historical approaches to fairy tales.

Yet, as much as this book is indebted to previous socio-historical studies of fairy tales, it also covers new terrain. Unlike Jack Zipes' *Victorian Fairy Tales: The Revolt of the Fairies and Elves* or Jennifer Schacker's *National Dreams: The Remaking of Fairy Tales in Nineteenth-Century England*, Hillard's study does not focus on Victorian fairy tales as primary texts. Instead, *Spellbound* breaks new ground by examining the way in which fairy tales impacted on the wider literature of the time. The book thus launches its investigation across several different narrative mediums, including poetry, fiction and drama. This well-rounded approach shows how Victorian novelists, poets and playwrights were all "spellbound" by the fairy-tale genre and incorporated it into their writing. Hillard examines the works of renowned Victorian authors such as Charles Dickens, Christina Rossetti, George Eliot and the Brontës, but from a new perspective. Though canonical texts like *Jane Eyre*, *Pickwick Papers* and "Goblin Market" have already received a great amount of scholarly attention, they have rarely been discussed side by side with "Sleeping Beauty," "Rumpelstiltskin," and "Little Red Riding Hood." For example, in chapter six, "Keats on Sleep and Beauty," Hillard looks at Keats' "Eve of St. Agnes" in relation to "Sleeping Beauty," encouraging us to view the canonical poem from a fresh angle. In essence, *Spellbound* is a book that centres on intertextuality: it is not simply a study of fairy tales, and nor is it simply a study of Victorian literature; it offers an insight into the interplay between the two, illustrating how fairy tales permeated the works of the great Victorian writers.

However, the real strength of *Spellbound* lies in the way it relates literary discussions to the real-world issues of Victorian England. The book highlights not only the influence of fairy tales on canonical Victorian texts, but also the way in which fairy tales were involved in the key cultural discourses of Victorian England. Hillard's book is broken down into four thematic sections: matter, spell, produce and paraphrase. Each of these sections deals with a key discourse that was pertinent to the Victorian era, and highlights how fairy tales saturated that particular discourse. These include models of time, anxieties over industrial and imperial progress, and perceptions of labour. By orienting her study to these pivotal debates, Hillard illuminates not only the effect of fairy tales on Victorian literature, but also their role in the development of Victorian society in general.

Spellbound will appeal to those undertaking research in fairy tales, those interested in Victorian literature more broadly, historians of the Victorian period, and even those with a general interest. Fairy tale scholars will appreciate Hillard's awareness of European fairy-tale history, which she skilfully weaves into her discussions. This book is particularly recommended for scholars who are usually based in European fairy-tale studies



and who wish to gain a deeper understanding of how fairy tales influenced the English-speaking world. Literature scholars wishing to read something new about time-honoured Victorian texts will also benefit from this study. Even the seasoned Dickens or Rossetti scholar will find something new in the pages of *Spellbound*. The book will also prove useful for historians of the Victorian era, particularly those interested in an interdisciplinary approach to the study of history and literature. And indeed, even the general reader will enjoy Hillard's accessible writing style and engaging voice. Just as Hillard argues that the Victorians were "spellbound" by fairy tales, academics and general readers alike will be equally enchanted.

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NOTES

- ¹ J. R. R. Tolkien, "On Fairy-Stories," in *Tree and Leaf* (London: Unwin Books, 1964), 34.