

Laura Forsberg, “Nature’s Invisibilia: The Victorian Microscope and the Miniature Fairy.” *Victorian Studies* 57.4 (2015): 638-66.

The fairy has been neglected in scholarship; seen as being a frivolous branch of British literature, fairy texts have seemed until recently to be trivial productions with no real relevance to the real world. Laura Forsberg’s article is the latest in a series of scholarly re-evaluations of the fairy’s role in nineteenth-century culture, and she convincingly demonstrates that there is more to the fairy than first meets the critical eye.

Forsberg’s central preoccupation is with what she terms Victorian “fairy science” (660). The scientific works on which she focuses, including Edwin Lankester’s *Half-Hours with the Microscope: Being a Popular Guide to the Use of the Microscope as a Means of Amusement and Instruction* (1859) and Mary Ward’s *Microscope Teachings: Descriptions of Various Objects of Especial Interest and Beauty Adapted for Microscopic Observation* (1864), believed that users of the microscope should employ the fairy “lens” to engage with the mysterious miniature worlds unveiled by the instrument. Empirical facts, in these texts, she argues, were often secondary to the sense of wonder generated by the user’s imaginative interpretations of the miniscule life forms presented to them. Forsberg suggests that there were two ways to look at the world “scientifically”: “either through the dry objective lens of empiricism or through the rich imaginative lens of the fairy” (660). The microscope itself becomes a key sight in this dispute, since: “On the one hand, the microscope was an instrument of rigorous scientific empiricism strictly opposed to fanciful ideas about fairies,” while on the other “the microscope serves as a portal into the unknown and mysterious world of miniature life (639). Because the microscope only allowed users a partial view, it encouraged them to embellish on the tantalizing glimpses they had seen by adding imaginative flourishes to empirical fact (652-53). The microscope allowed users – both amateur and professional – to perceive a “scientific fairyland” in samples of pond scum, a speck of dust, or any number of items or substances they chose to examine. It combined an objective and subjective view of the world to create accounts which tempered rational explanation with magical interpretation, thus emphasizing the wonder still to be discovered in quotidian experiences.

Unlike the telescope, which revealed wonders at a great distance, the mysteries revealed by the microscope were – literally – at the user’s fingertips (639). Similarly, the fairy allowed the Victorians to imagine an unseen, unknown world that existed all around them: fairyland could be anywhere, or nowhere. Furthermore, if the microscope had revealed so much new information about the natural world, who was to say that it might not one day unveil a fairy (641)? Fairy and microscope each “offered Victorians a means of imaginatively reconceptualising the natural world as a place of minute wonders” (640). Forsberg reveals that naturalists and lay users of the microscope used fairy vocabulary to explain the wonders they saw, whilst writers of fanciful literature often used scientific discourses to give credence to their inventions. Thus, she argues, “Rather than opposing one another, scientific discoveries and fairy fictions reinforced each other’s appeal” (640).

Forsberg presents convincing close readings of such texts as Fitz-James O’Brien’s short story “The Diamond Lens” (1858), Kingsley’s canonical fairy novel *The Water Babies* (1863) and Arabella Buckley’s popular science text *The Fairy-Land of Science* that demonstrate the interconnections between the fairy and the microscope.

These readings unpack her claim that science was divided between empirical rationalists and more fanciful naturalists, and demonstrate, too, the ongoing relevance of the fairy in an industrialized world that had seemed to kill off these minute beings. Forsberg perhaps spends too much time early on in the article presenting a detailed history of the fairy which exist already in works such as Carole Silver's study *Strange and Secret Peoples: Fairies and Victorian Consciousnesses* (1998) or Nicola Bown's monograph *Fairies in Nineteenth-Century Art and Literature* (2001). This cultural history of the fairy does not materially build on previous accounts, and nor is it essential to Forsberg's argument here, but she does present some key texts with an unusual sympathy for the author's or illustrator's personal motivations (particularly Thomas Stodhart's 1797 illustrations for *The Rape of the Lock*). Where Forsberg's significant contribution lies is in her presentation of an alternative to Silver's or Bown's fairies as being symptoms of an anxious nineteenth-century imagination (650).

What Forsberg presents is a beautifully written, convincing and closely argued account of the serious effect of wonder on nineteenth-century science. Taken in this view, the fairy becomes a key player in scientific developments because, in imaginatively seeking the fairy, scientists opened up their minds to seemingly fantastical possibilities that might – and sometimes did – prove to be an empirical truth.

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