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Victorian Counter-Worlds and the Uncanny: The Fantasy Illustrations of Walter Crane and Arthur Rackham

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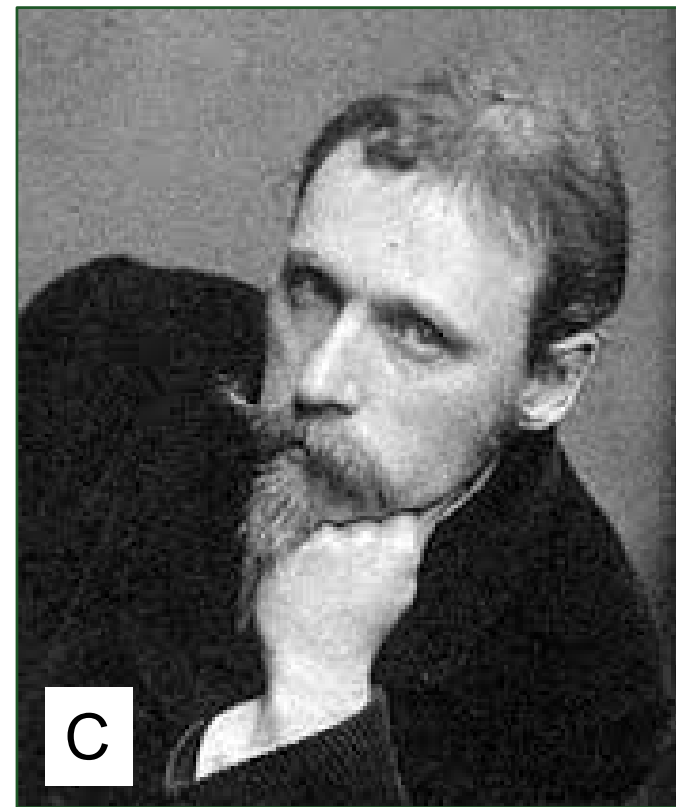
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Victorian Counter-Worlds and the Uncanny:

The Fantasy Illustrations of Walter Crane and Arthur Rackham

Background

Fantasy literature began as a grand escape, an inventive strategy to Houdini one's way out of the quickly transforming and fast-paced world of Victorian Britain by simply turning the pages of a book. By 1850, more than half of Britain's population lived in cities, and the Industrial Revolution demanded much from a developing and exhausted middle class. Fantasy offered the British transportation to exotic lands and separate dimensions and often explored past worlds graced by a purity and richness only dreamed of by the Victorians. While spawning counter-worlds (worlds that function under different rules and reason than our own), fantasy literature from the Victorian Era also approached a number of new and adventurous themes such as the uncanny, which utilizes magic, imaginary creatures, and the anthropomorphism of animals. Elements of the uncanny appear in fantasy literature when something familiar to everyday life is suddenly transformed by the author or illustrator in a shocking but not always unpleasant manner.



A: Arthur Rackham's *Undine*. *Undine*. London; New York: W. Heinemann; Doubleday, Page & Co., 1909.



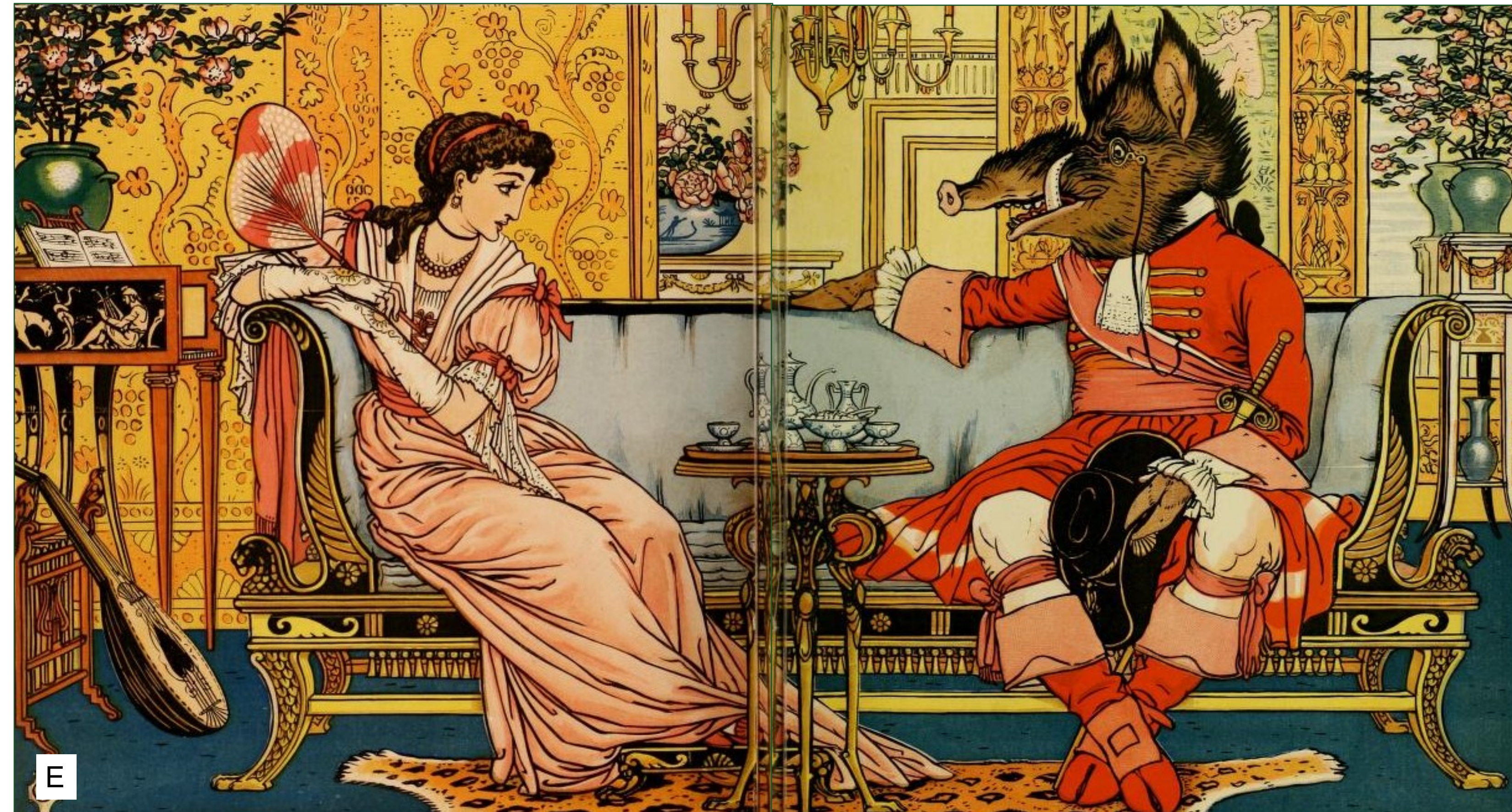
B: Walter Crane's *Aladdin, And the Wonderful Lamp*. Crane, Walter. *Aladdin, And the Wonderful Lamp*. London; New York: J. Lane, 1897.

C: Walter Crane, ca. 1886.

D: Arthur Rackham, painting at his easel.



A



E



B

"He was dressed in a handsome suit of clothes and rode a beautiful horse; by his side marched a number of attendants, scattering handfuls of gold among the people."

Arthur Rackham (1867-1939)

Born on September 19th of 1867, Arthur Rackham was the fourth child of Anne and Alfred Thomas Rackham, who would later have eight more children. Arthur Rackham never enrolled in art classes full-time; he preferred to work day jobs to help pay for his schooling. Therefore, in 1884 Rackham enrolled in Lambeth School of Art part-time, and finally, at age 27, he illustrated his first book *To the Other Side* as well as the poem "To Spring" by Richard Le Gallienne. On July 16th of 1903 Arthur Rackham married Edyth Starkie who matched Rackham's loving, charismatic nature and artistic eye. Rackham's way with lines and watercolors as well as his pleasant personality lead to years filled with so many commissions he was forced to turn work down frequently. Rackham's illustrations never lost their sense of wonderment or their ability to transcend the affairs and issues of the real world. Rackham left this world permanently in the fall of 1939 shortly after completing his final illustrations for *The Wind in the Willows*, which was published posthumously.

Walter Crane (1845-1915)

Born in Liverpool, England on August 15, 1845, Walter Crane was the third of Thomas and Marie Crane's five children. Having access to pen and paper early on, Walter's talent as an artist became evident when he was just six years old, and his father (also an artist) began helping him develop his fanciful style. In 1858, several of Walter's pen and ink designs were shown to John Ruskin by the family's friend Mr. Wooldridge. Ruskin was extremely impressed and passed the drawings along to wood engraver James Linton. Linton agreed to take Walter as an apprentice, and Crane suddenly found himself entering one of the best engraving workshops in England at only thirteen years old. In 1865, Crane met a pioneer in the craft of color printing named Edmund Evans. Evans commissioned Crane's work as he produced a series of children's books, and Crane's career took off. Years later, Crane died suddenly in Horsham Hospital on March 14, 1915. His friends believed Crane was too devastated by the loss of his wife—who had passed away just months earlier—to fight for life.

Crane's Style

In 1875, Walter Crane's *Beauty and the Beast* was released by Routledge and Sons, and more of his imaginative, anthropomorphic illustrations entertained the public. Crane's Beast takes the form of a boar-like animal with great big teeth and a trunk for a snout. Despite his wild, animal looks, the beast maintains impeccable posture and wears magnificent clothing. Furthermore, instead of drawing the beast as a frightening monster, Crane uses his skill and knack for detail to give the beast an expression of harmlessness. Suddenly, a character capable of inspiring nightmares is approachable to child readers. Crane's use of the uncanny is particularly noteworthy in the illustration featured to the left. Crane transforms the extraordinary—a gruesome beast—into something that appears quite ordinary. In the picture, the beast sits with Beauty on an elegant sofa. His bearing is relaxed as he wears a monocle on his eye and grasps a fashionable hat with his hoof. The exaggeration of the beast's human qualities allows the reader to imagine the Beast—who belongs to a counter-world—in the context of Victorian Britain. Of course, the Beast's fanciful attire as well as his palace's very Victorian décor are not only meant to confuse reality and fantasy; these details also serve as effective humor.



G



H

Rackham's Style

Arthur Rackham was commissioned in 1905 to illustrate J.M. Barrie's *Peter Pan in Kensington Gardens*. After one year of work dedicated to illustrating baby Peter's wild adventures among the fantastic fairyland of Kensington Gardens, the book was published by Hodder and Stoughton and became the most popular Christmas gift of 1906 and many Christmases after. In Rackham's illustration of Mr. Salford, "a crab-apple of an old gentleman who wandered all day in the Gardens," the weight of his lines is the only way to distinguish what is fantastic and what is not. Mr. Salford is outlined in hard, heavy ink, while the fairy tale creatures just behind him are made of less bold strokes, hinting at a translucent quality and secret presence. This subtle detail changes the tone of the illustration, giving it a slightly unnerving feel. Upon studying the picture, readers might just turn their heads, expecting to find some magical creature or creatures perched over their shoulders. Furthermore, Rackham's even more dramatically softened outline of what appears to be Westminster Abbey in the background creates a foggy and dreamy frame for the illustration. Despite its unnerving and unfamiliar elements, the picture manages to express a magical joy that celebrates the possibility of a counter-world hidden amidst reality. Mr. Salford demonstrates this joy by carrying a look of peaceful wonder as though he knows there is another beautiful layer to his present reality hiding just behind him. In this illustration, Rackham masters the uncanny by creating an appealing balance of the familiar and fantastic.



F

E: Crane, Walter, Edmund Evans and Jeanne-Marie Beaumont. *Beauty and the Beast*. London; New York: George Routledge & Sons, 1875.

F: Barrie, J.M. and Arthur Rackham. *Peter Pan in Kensington Gardens*. London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1912.

G: Rackham portrays himself in the face of this Kensington Garden Goblin from Barrie's story.

H: Rackham's famously anthropomorphized and haunting trees appear in *Peter Pan in Kensington Gardens* as well.