

“Do You Believe in Fairies?”: The Hiss of Dramatic License

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In the manipulation of character and circumstance, drama has the power to make the improbable seem natural. Neoclassical French dramaturgy, for example, sought such a tight relationship between plot, play structure, and language that tragic events were conveyed as “an inescapable burden.”¹ Extreme convention is a form of license, in neoclassicism as much as in naturalism, though they are manifested differently. Spectators negotiate the conventions to understand as well as to assess plays. License implies contingency as well as agency: the free range of imagination within the playwright’s concomitant display of competence, constraint in tension with liberty, ironic attention to regimes of authority, and the baring of a device in tandem with its obscuring.

The definition of dramatic license developed in this essay aims to avoid ascribing attributes redundantly with other already denotative terms. This builds on my earlier work on theatricality, in which the active dissociation of the spectator from an event is a crucial aspect of civil society that enables spectators, whether on the street or in the theatre, to ascribe what they witness as “theatricality.”² I propose that dramatic license resembles poetic and artistic license insofar as the spectator is aware of conventions sufficiently to know they are invoked, but responds in something other than the customary way to the artist/instigator’s invitation to actively suspend disbelief while depending explicitly upon the awareness of how an event is framed by narrative and

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¹ Herbert Lindenberger, *Historical Drama: The Relation of Literature and Reality* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1975), 134.

² “Theatricality and Civil Society,” in *Theatricality*, ed. Tracy C. Davis and Thomas Postlewait (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 127–55.

then altered by a disparate frame. Unlike theatricality, which is an ascription made by a spectator as a result of being distanced from an event—not something inherent in an act or event—dramatic license originates with an instigator and is recognized by a receiver.

Drama of the Victorian period—in a vast range of genres—thrived upon contingency. Nineteenth-century theatre is rife with experimentation about dramatic ambiguity, the trustworthiness of representation, and the respective roles of artists and spectators in making and assenting to the mimetic contract. *Peter Pan*, first produced at a transitional moment in stage history (with the waning of the music hall's and the raucous harlequinade's influence on pantomime, the entrenchment of a newly modulated Christmas entertainment explicitly for children, and the prevalence of realism in straight drama) intersected with two related debates about British ethnology (the farewell to fairies and the extinction of gypsy-tinkers). Its aesthetic and ethnological stances were made an issue within the play through a referendum famously put to the audience. As such, it provides a fruitful test case for license and its reception. Ascriptions of poetic license originated with elevated language but can apply to everyday speech, just as artistic license is used apropos of fine art as well as visual material made by those without skill. Dramatic license is sometimes the label given to the mechanisms for setting up the conditions for spectators' willing suspension of disbelief, yet while it is used in common parlance, the term has achieved no consensus of meaning. Unlike poetic license—"the traditional practice among poets, dramatists, and others of departing from conventional rules of form, fact, realism, logic, and the presentation of truth, for the sake of the effect to be gained"³—and artistic license—involving exaggeration, narrative expedience, and other forms of latitude with content and form—dramatic license as yet has no official independent denotation.

Willing Suspension of Disbelief

Samuel Taylor Coleridge coined the phrase "willing suspension of disbelief" in reference to the romantic elements of poems such as "Christabel," the "Dark Ladie," and the "Rime of the Ancient Mariner." The phrase appears in *Biographia Literaria*, explicating Coleridge's version of adherence to nature credited to an experiential reality under supernatural influence, a more "dramatic truth" that was nonetheless recognizable: "yet so as to transfer from our inward nature a human interest and a semblance of truth sufficient to procure for these shadows of imagination that willing suspension of disbelief for the moment, which constitutes poetic faith."⁴ David Chandler explains that Coleridge borrowed the key phrase in this passage from Marcus Tullius Cicero's "*id est assensionis retentio*" via Jacob Brucker's summary of the philosophy of the Third Academy. Thus, "*assensus suspensio*" (suspension of belief) was modernized as "*id est assensionis retentio*" (suspension of assent) and hybridized by Coleridge as "willing suspension of disbelief."⁵

³ Tom McArthur, *The Oxford Companion to the English Language* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992), 790.

⁴ Samuel Taylor Coleridge, *Biographia Literaria*, ed. George Watson (London: J. M. Dent, 1965), 168–69.

⁵ "The Academic method of pursuing philosophy practised by Careades was almost the same as that followed by Arcesilaus, the latter having introduced a suspension of assent that relied on a lack of certainty about physical phenomena." Translation by David Chandler, in "Coleridge's 'suspension of disbelief' and Jacob Brucker's '*assensus suspensio*,'" *Notes and Queries* 43, no. 1 (1996): 39. Chandler

Despite its intended reference to verse readers' poetic faith, "willing suspension of disbelief" has been borrowed and naturalized by drama scholars as the necessary condition for dramatic reception. For example, Anne Ubersfeld describes how the intervals (intermissions) between acts in a performance "oblige the spectator to come back to a twofold reality—the reality of the spectator beyond the theatre, and a referential reality pertaining to a story that marches on, advancing the action during the interval."⁶ The interval is reality, whereas the resumption of the play following the narrative's suspension, or elapse of dramatic time, requires spectators to enter once again into a fictive world. This effect is enhanced by the fact that prior to the mid-nineteenth century the real time of intervals was of no fixed duration, creating suspense in the audience about what might cause a delay. For example, did a patron's bribe to a stage employee result in his letter being delivered backstage; did an actress respond to being wooed; was the bold yet favored patron invited backstage; was he admitted to the actors' lounge or the inner sanctum of the actress's dressing room; and what transpired when the two met?⁷ Thus, when the play resumed, spectators consented to temporarily set aside their knowledge that the stage action was fictive, relative to what they knew (or thought they knew) about the conditions of performance, real lives of the players, and their own feelings (erotic or otherwise) about the performers. What Coleridge extolled in poetry—the awakening to "loveliness and the wonders of the world before us; an inexhaustible treasure, but for which, in consequence of the film of familiarity and selfish solicitude, we have eyes yet see not"—became in the age of Romantic acting and actor celebrity emblematic of the contract of theatrical spectatorship with dramatic narrative.⁸

Alice Rayner explains that the sense of the real in representation requires a hidden, invisible, ghosted real so that differentiation "between kinds of reality in theatrical space signals not just the acceptance of convention but the contingency of desire on prohibition and invisibility, and the wilful refusal of contradictions to that desire."⁹ Theatre requires cocreation between the imaginary field of the visible representation and that of empirical practices, such as the human labor and mechanical ingenuity that enable scenery to change, or the doubling of character upon performer which is an invention of Romantic acting. Spectators' willing suspension of disbelief enables the onstage fiction simultaneously with an ideological, social, and aesthetic contract prohibiting acknowledgement of legions of carpenters, cellarmen, flymen, and pyrotechnists who signal each other with a system of whistles to manipulate acres of canvas suspended on a hemp rope counterweight system that resembles the complexities of rigging a naval man-o'-war. Rayner cites Brecht's example of the man who

draws on Cicero's *Academica* II (Lucullus), xvii: 59 and Brucker's *The History of Philosophy . . . Drawn up from Brucker's Historia Critica Philosophiae*, 2 vols. (London, 1791), I:253. Coleridge borrowed Brucker's text from the library in 1795 and referred to it later in life. See George Whalley, "The Bristol Library Borrowings of Southey and Coleridge," *The Library* 4 (1949): 114–32.

⁶ Anne Ubersfeld, *Reading Theatre*, trans. Frank Collins (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1999), 144.

⁷ This scenario is documented and explained in Leonard R. Berlanstein, *Daughters of Eve: A Cultural History of French Theater Women from the Old Regime to the Fin-de-Siècle* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2001), 128.

⁸ Coleridge, *Biographia Literaria*, 169.

⁹ Alice Rayner, "Rude Mechanicals and the Specters of Marx," *Theatre Journal* 54, no. 4 (2002): 544.

leaves his dressing room an actor and enters the stage a king: the stagehands laugh in their beer at the absurdity of the transformation, yet the audience sees history unfold—at least for the time being.

Onstage, a symbolic world is created in which the phantasmic is a necessary condition of making narrative. Rational thought is inimical to mimesis, just as it is to Romantic poetry, so to draw spectators into the narrative the split between symbolically constituted worlds and unmediated experience must be unrecognized. Gunter Gebauer and Christoph Wulf characterize this as an exertion of power:

The history of mimesis is a history of disputes over the power to make symbolic worlds, that is, the power to represent the self and others and interpret the world. To this extent mimesis possesses a political dimension and is part of the history of power relations.¹⁰

Thus, theatrical mimesis requires more than poetic faith in what is being depicted. Entering into the theatrical contract involves a suspension of belief commensurate with a suspension of assent, conflated in Coleridge's term as the "willing suspension of disbelief," in which a spectator does not consent to believe but rather to temporarily not deny the mimesis. By surrendering their prerogative to claim the known world, spectators grant power to the narrative and tacitly agree to let the theatre explain what cannot be known because it is fundamentally untrue. What transpires onstage is inevitably an infidelity, a subversion, and a transgression, and the theatrical contract is an agreement to temporarily forget the mimetic condition. Absorption may or may not result, and indeed loss of differentiation between life and stage may push the spectatorial contract from willing suspension of disbelief to unwilling suspension of disbelief: going from agreement not to deny, to inability to perceive the distinction between narrative fiction and reality. In children this is the result of naiveté (a lack of knowledge); in adults it may be accorded the clinical term psychosis (delusion). Other spectators, I argue, make decisions about the mimetic claim to power; at these junctures the choice about reception of the theatrical infidelity is highlighted.

Taking License

Coleridge's "willing suspension of disbelief" is synonymous with poetic license, whereby rules governing the form, or grammar, or ostensible logic of a medium are transgressed for purposeful effect.¹¹ While drama frequently takes poetic license, conflating the poetical and the dramatic does not allow for the genre distinction of what could be specifically dramatic license. Poetic license enhances the power of the aesthetically created symbolic world. Given that theatre's ontology constantly plays with what logically contradicts absorption, could dramatic license work differently from poetic license, highlighting the politics of mimesis that exist in the interaction between stage and audience?

Poetic and artistic license are frequently called dramatic license. For example, the filmmaker Oliver Stone explains:

¹⁰ Gunter Gebauer and Christoph Wulf, *Mimesis: Culture, Art, Society*, trans. Don Reneau (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1992), 3.

¹¹ See, for example, W. J. B. Owen, ed. and intro., *Wordsworth and Coleridge Lyrical Ballads* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1969), xxii.

I think of dramatic license as a restating of any reported action—reported, not necessarily factual—using actors, costumes, make-up, the condensation of events, and the invention of dialog which occurred behind closed doors, to illustrate your conception of what occurred.¹²

Stone gives two chief examples. In *JFK*, he condensed the five homosexual figures who were involved in the Oswald trial into a single character, Willie O'Keefe, played by Kevin Bacon. This, Stone says, is dramatic license because it expediently establishes a story element without unduly weighing upon the narrative. Stone's second example is the Tonkin Gulf Resolution passed by Congress following the alleged attacks on two US destroyers, two days apart, in August 1964. President Johnson used this congressional authority to bomb North Vietnam, escalating into a protracted war. Stone's point is that because the attack on the second destroyer was later proved to be a fabrication, the President used dramatic license in the sense of taking liberties with the narrative facts. Johnson took a liberty with the truth, and in the manner of politicians, started a war with it; Stone, in the manner of artists, recognizably condensed historical elements for the sake of narrative efficiency in *JFK*.¹³ Both cases turn on divergence from facts: Stone does it through narrative compression and Johnson through narrative invention. While Stone ascribes dramatic license to these instances, both examples fit squarely within the common definition of poetic license.

Artistic license is typically invoked to characterize unconventional combinations of artistic elements, such as painting within sculpture, abstract techniques in realistic works, or familiar materials made unfamiliar through radical changes to their functionality.¹⁴ Like poetic license, artistic license may come down to a question of contrast, accuracy, and taste in a visual rather than descriptive medium.¹⁵ Either may be invoked to indicate excess¹⁶ or satire,¹⁷ turning on a question of taste, yet the medium per se may not be important to the efficacy of the license that is taken.

This suggests that the demarcations of poetic and artistic license are murky, serving sometimes to shape the narrative and sometimes to function as a kind of reverse *ekphrasis* whereby visual depictions are narratological. Given these functional similarities, is there scope for dramatic license to be defined in a manner distinct from its

¹² Gary Crowdus, "History, Dramatic License, and the Larger Historical Truths: An Interview with Oliver Stone," *Cineaste* 22, no. 4 (1997): 38.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 38.

¹⁴ For example, a review of a portraiture exhibition describes how phrenology and eugenics are "aggressive" rhetorics exerting pressure to "objectify, vitiate, or distort" the human face. Antiquated versions of the face were hung amidst contemporary straight photographic portraiture: "This is a worthwhile objective, but it ran constantly against the grain of the most resistant material—imagery with an institutional rationale that expressly ignores, or with an artistic license that depreciates, the human spirit." Max Kozloff, "The Hive of Subtlety: Faces and their Lookalikes in the History of Photography," *Aperture* 72, no. 7 (2000): 72.

¹⁵ Likewise, in the Raven Group's performance and video work, artistic license versus accuracy of representation is considered key. Jennifer Price, "Shishir Kurup & Page Leong: License to Play," *High Performance* 17 (Winter 1994): 48–49.

¹⁶ See Anna Gaskell's bombastic juxtapositions of girlish innocence with narrative intimations of foul play, in Jan Avgikos, "Anna Gaskell's Girl Art," *Parkett* 59 (2000): 168–76.

¹⁷ Roberto Benigni's film *Life is Beautiful* depicts a father turning a death camp into a game to cushion his young son from the true horrors of their circumstances. The narrative liberties were denounced by some critics who argued that the Holocaust cannot be addressed with artistic license of this kind or degree. Maurizio Sanzio Viano, "Life is Beautiful: Reception, Allegory and Holocaust Laughter," *Film Quarterly* 53, no. 1 (1999): 26–34.

precursor terms, even if limited in applicability to the form to which it refers—drama—and the circumstances of its theatrical performance? If so, how can dramatic license be distinct from mimesis (imitative representation) and the condition of theatre (making a lie, accounting for it, naturalizing it, and then making another lie) and serve to enhance the genre's power to carry meaning in performance? Can it involve freedom with form, content, and means, and depart from convention or expectation—yet not be dependent upon or synonymous with a specific literary or illusory device—in order to maintain its distinctness from poetic and artistic license? If so, can it be utilized and recognized without invoking judgment resulting from an antitheatrical prejudice, such as the lack of trustworthiness in verisimilitude, or the discrepant awareness associated with dramatic irony?

The balance of this essay explores these questions in a historical case study that highlights theatre's function to ostend—to show, not tell—allowing for an audience's autonomy of response. Ostension's centrality to theatre reception should, likewise, be central to theatre's history.¹⁸ "Dramatic" and "license" are both crucial to the idea. Dramatic connotes not only of or pertaining to the drama, a literary artifact of theatre, but also the condition of heightened sensibility associated with stage performance. License is more complicated. In its nominal form, it denotes a liberty, leave, or permission, as in license to depart; a formally constituted authority, sometimes a document, as in a marriage license; an abuse of freedom, as in the libertine's licentiousness; or a deviation from a rule, as in poetic license. In its transitive form, the only nonobsolete meaning of license denotes the authority to do something, such as the colloquialisms "license to print money" or James Bond's license to kill. Embedded in license, therefore, are contradictions: liberty and its excess, certification of competence and deviation from form, ironic attention to authority, as well as baring a device while obscuring it. The question of how "license" might combine denotatively with "dramatic" in the ostension of theatrical performance is a provocative question for dramatic theory.

Active Creation of Disbelief

The first performance of Victor Hugo's *Hernani* has been historicized for bringing literary controversies about Romanticism into the discussion of mainstream French theatre and drama and, conversely, culminating the battle between neoclassicism and Romanticism. For the premiere in 1830, Hugo's self-selected claque, the *chevelus*, arrived early at the Comédie-Française attired in motley versions of fancy historic costume. While waiting to enter the theatre, they were verbally abused and then pelted with gutter debris. Once safely inside, they sat down to a repast of spicy food and copious drink, then, unable to access the lavatories, relieved themselves in the corners. It is no wonder, therefore, that the *beau monde* (not exclusively the supporters of neoclassicism) were disgusted with the claque before the play even began.¹⁹

¹⁸ For a cogent analysis of ostension, see Vicky Ann Cremona, Peter Eversmann, Hans van Maanen, Wilmar Sauter, and John Tulloch, eds., *Theatrical Events: Borders, Dynamics and Frames* (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2004).

¹⁹ Albert W. Halsall, *Victor Hugo and the Romantic Drama* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1998), 78.

At the premiere and throughout the play's run, audiences responded to the dialogue, *mise en scène*, and mixture of grotesquerie and indecorum with laughter, noise, agitation, and whistling. Most famously, the *dos anglais* displayed by the actor playing Hernani—who leaned against the cupboard down left in which the King was concealed, his back to the audience—epitomized the idea of Romantic irony through self-reflexiveness. These techniques called attention to the creation of illusion, gave opportunities for actors to signal their pretense in relation to character and narrative, and horrified and thrilled spectators depending on their disposition. Brecht would call it gestic acting.²⁰ But while *Hernani* was less a litmus test of the validity of Romantic drama than an opportunity for spectators to demonstrate their pre-extant affinity, it served as an outlet for “sympathy, antagonism, or . . . simple curiosity” and gave the audience opportunities to intervene in the critical debate.²¹ Spectators voted, so to speak, for their preference with the entire aesthetic of the performance stipulated in the referendum. In a sense, *Hernani* deployed dramatic license. Certainly, it utilized unconventional combinations of elements (prosody, utilization of stage space, and verisimilitude) in the manner of poetic and artistic license crafted in a unique manner for live presentation. As long as the Romantic precepts remained controversial, the play can be said to have utilized dramatic license. However, once these devices became commonplace, the license, as it were, expired.

Willing Retention of Disbelief

Another well-known and enduring instance that evinces spectatorial voting not for the actors, author, play, or production but as part of the narrative itself—the most famous episode in J. M. Barrie's play *Peter Pan* (1904)—provides for a more extended discussion of dramatic license. It is necessary to recapitulate some of the plot in detail, for the salient parts are precisely those excised from the more familiar Disney animated version (1953) and *Hook* (1991).²²

Act 4 turns on the paradox of presence and pretense:²³ when the act begins, Wendy, John, and Michael Darling are seated with the Lost Boys for dinner in the Home Under

²⁰ Brecht wrote to Henri Magnan, 26 June 1955: “Alienation effects have long been known in the theatre and in other arts. The fact is that we always get an alienation effect when art does not sustain the illusion that the viewer is face to face with nature itself. In the theatre, for instance, the objective world is alienated by the convention of versification or by a highly personal style or by abrupt shifts between verse and prose or between the serious and the comic.” John Willett, ed., *Bertolt Brecht Letters*, trans. Ralph Manheim (London: Methuen, 1990), 543. See also Halsall, *Victor Hugo*, 79–88; and Frederick Burwick, “Stage Illusion and the Stage Designs of Goethe and Hugo,” *Word & Image* 4, no. 3/4 (1988): 693–94.

²¹ Marvin Carlson, *The French Stage in the Nineteenth Century* (Metuchen: Scarecrow Press, 1972), 65.

²² Many Americans recall the passage, “Do you believe in fairies?” from Mary Martin's often-rerun televised *Peter Pan* (1960). She turns to the camera and puts the question, more as an imperative than an interrogative. The 2003 film *Peter Pan* restores a version of Peter's query, substituting children tucked in their nurseries (in the manner of *Peter and Wendy*) for a responsive audience. In filmed versions, there can never be the danger present in live presentation that fairies will not be sufficiently supported for Tinker Bell to revive.

²³ Act divisions refer to the authorized printed edition of 1928 rather than to the original performance in 1904–05. Originally, the play had three acts, including two scenes in act 2 representing the arrival in Never Land (called the Never, Never, Never Land) and the building of the Wendy house (scene 1) and the Home Under the Ground (scene 2). In the first revival (1905–06), the scene of the

the Ground, except that the meal—like the washing-up that follows it—is entirely mimed. This is a tradition that predates Wendy and the Darling boys' coming to Never Land, for as Barrie writes in characteristically loquacious stage directions "*indeed she was rather startled to find, on arriving, that Peter knew of no other kind [of dinner]. . . . He insists that the pretend meals should be partaken of with gusto, and we see his band doing their best to obey orders,*"²⁴ as well as a staple pretense of precocious childhood.²⁵ After dinner, Peter returns home from a hunt during which he bagged two tigers and a pirate.

JOHN: (*boldly*) Where are their heads?
 PETER: (*contracting his little brows*) In the bag.
 JOHN: (*No, he doesn't say it. He backs away*)
 WENDY: (*peeping into the bag*) They are beauties! (*She has learned her lesson*)²⁶

So, the erstwhile normal activities such as eating are pretended: the boys call Wendy "Mother" to establish her authority; Wendy supports Peter's boast to sustain his ego and reputation for hunting prowess; John gives off contradictory signals about his disbelief in the trophies, though he does acknowledge Peter's status.

Wendy tells the boys a bedtime story that features the Darling children flying home, and describes their lives once they have grown up. Suddenly alarmed at the idea that a great deal of time has passed in Never Land and that her own mother may be mourning for her and her brothers, Wendy decides to fly back to Bloomsbury at once. Distressed that Wendy will leave them, the Lost Boys propose to accompany the Darlings back to London. Peter swiftly arranges with the Indians guarding the underground home to escort them through the woods and for Tinker Bell, Peter's impudent fairy companion who is manifest "by her tintinnabulation and by a will-o'-the-wisp gleam of light on the wall,"²⁷ to take them across the sea. But before they can ascend to start their journey, the Pirates ambush the Indians, killing many and scattering the remainder. Ever treacherous, the Pirates play the Indians' tom-toms, sending a false signal of victory to Peter, who authorizes Wendy's journey to begin. Before she goes, she dispenses a dose of pretend medicine (actually just water) into a shell for Peter. As soon as they ascend, Wendy and the boys are captured by Pirates. Peter, thinking all is well, falls into a picturesque sleep. Captain Hook searches for a way into the burrow. He wriggles into the underground room; seeing the medicine, he adds five drops of poison expressed from his own red eye, and wriggles away again.

Mermaids' Lagoon was added as act 3, followed by the Home Under the Ground (act 4). This is retained in the published edition. For elaboration, see Barrie's typescripts at the Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Yale University, summarized in R. L. Green, *Fifty Years of Peter Pan* (London: Peter Davies, 1954).

²⁴ J. M. Barrie, *Peter Pan; or the Boy who Would not Grow Up*, ed. Peter Hollindale (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995), 127.

²⁵ See, for example, the character of Sara Crewe in Mrs. Frances Hodgson Burnett's *A Little Un-Fairy Princess* (Shaftesbury 1902–03). In contrast, adaptations of *Alice in Wonderland* rely on the pleasure that derives from surprise that neither Alice nor the other characters pretend that anything is fantastical. In *Peter Pan*, John seems cognisant of the need for other children to pretend, and hence it becomes characteristic of childhood per se—but not of theatre per se.

²⁶ Barrie, *Peter Pan*, 129.

²⁷ Review of first production, "Duke of York's Theatre: *Peter Pan*," *Times*, 28 December 1904, 4.

Tinker Bell returns and in rapid jingling fairy language tells Peter about the Indians' defeat and the children's capture.

Up to this point in act 4, Barrie has proposed that what is pretense is not real; what is imaginary has reality (for some); the imaginary and imagined can be commensurate; the real can be misconstrued; what is real may not be present; pretense is unreliable, fragile, and unknowable; what you do not know can indeed hurt you; and physical matter of imaginary and real consequence can coexist. What follows is the *coup de théâtre*.

Tink tries to tell Peter that his medicine is poisoned, and "*nobly swallows the draught as Peter's hand is reaching for it.*" The effects are immediate. She tenderly chides him, then swoons onto her little bed, ominously emitting a flickering light.

PETER: Her light is growing faint, and if it goes out, that means she is dead! Her voice is so low I can scarcely tell what she is saying. She says—she says she thinks she could get well again if children believed in fairies! (*He rises and throws out his arms he knows not to whom, perhaps to the boys and girls of whom he is not one*) Do you believe in fairies? Say quick that you believe! If you believe, clap your hands!

In order to make this appeal, Barrie pierces the convention of the fourth wall, a cardinal principle of contemporaneous realist theatre. Peter appeals to the darkness, to air, and yet clearly to the audience. It is the first and only time this occurs in *Peter Pan*, though to the extent that the play is in the tradition of nineteenth-century pantomime, direct address is not unusual. But in order to directly address an audience, it must be an intentional act, and Barrie stipulates that Peter speak "he knows not to whom." What Peter is instructed to do, instead, is to soliloquize.

PETER: (*Many clap, some don't, a few hiss. . . . But Tink is saved*) Oh thank you, thank you, thank you! And now to rescue Wendy!²⁸

As quickly as Tinker Bell is resurrected, Peter is once again self-absorbed and "frightfully happy" that he will have a fight to the death with Captain Hook. He takes flight and the curtain rings down.

What occurs in this passage? Tinker Bell is poisoned, sickens, and teeters on the brink of death. Peter appeals to the audience—whom he does not actually acknowledge—and their act of faith in the existence of fairies restores Tinker Bell to health. So, in precisely the moment when the apparatus of the theatre is laid bare—when the presence of an audience made emotionally vulnerable by the swooning of an erstwhile lively and sassy fist of light is called upon—the question of belief is foregrounded.²⁹ A fairy is self-sacrificing on behalf of a boy holding resolutely to childhood; the mortality of light is enacted but it means the faith in what Coleridge terms "these shadows of imagination" that equate to childhood itself. As Peter explains in act 1, when Tinker Bell is first introduced:

²⁸ Barrie, *Peter Pan*, 136–37.

²⁹ In an early draft, Barrie intimated the idea in the first nursery scene. Peter introduces Tinker Bell, then called Tippy-Toe, "who is last of all the fairies, because the others had died when their particular children said, 'I don't believe in fairies'—and there is a moment of suspense when, on waking, John declares that *he* doesn't believe. Tippy survives this declaration, being Peter's fairy, and pinches John until he changes his opinion." Also in this draft, instead of beckoning the children to clap when the fairy is poisoned, Peter appeals to them to wave their handkerchiefs (Green, *Fifty Years*, 45, 48).

- PETER: Children know such a lot now. Soon they don't believe in fairies, and every time a child says 'I don't believe in fairies' there is a fairy somewhere that falls down dead. (*He skips about heartlessly*)
- WENDY: Poor things!
- PETER: (*to whom this statement recalls a forgotten friend*) I can't think where she has gone. Tinker Bell, Tink, where are you?³⁰

At the end of act 4, the audience is called to action. By affirming faith the narrative resumes, the fairy is healed, and the boy is ebullient.

Maureen Duffy, in a Freudian analysis, dismisses the plea as sentimental and unconvincing, and sees Peter's appeal as "a moment when Barrie shamelessly plays on a youthful audience to bolster his own ego by demonstrating just how effective his theatrical magic is."³¹ Jacqueline Rose, usually an astute commentator on *Peter Pan*, asserts that this "is merely an extreme version of the demand of any play that, at least for the duration of its performance, the audience should believe that it is true."³² In fact, there is much more happening at this juncture, and it is not the truth of the play that is being judged. The audience is put on the spot: their belief in the existence of fairies as a species will save this one specimen. It is a referendum: are there fairies? Yes or no? If no, then the play is over. If yes, it may seem like faith healing, but it is a declaration of affiliation, as in "yes! I believe in fairies—though surely they must be rare—and so yes! I want to see this one survive!" Apparently an affirmative response was not assumed on the first night, because the orchestra was instructed to lead the clapping. Instead, however, the audience of adults—including the contingent of professional critics—obliged as requested.³³

Barrie's specifications in the script—not published until 1928—closely mirror one of his novelistic treatments of the scene, also published—in 1911—following a significant number of revivals of the play. In *Peter and Wendy*, Tinker Bell drinks the medicine to save Peter but does not have the strength to tell him why.

Her wings would scarcely carry her now, but in reply she alighted on his shoulder and gave his nose a loving bite. She whispered in his ear "you silly ass," and then, tottering to her chamber, lay down on the bed.

His head almost filled the fourth wall of her little room as he knelt near her in distress. Every moment her light was growing fainter; and he knew that if it went out she would be no more. She liked his tears so much that she put out her beautiful finger and let them run over it.

Her voice was so low that at first he could not make out what she said. Then he made it out. She was saying that she thought she could get well again if children believed in fairies.

Peter flung out his arms. There were no children there, and it was night time; but he addressed all who might be dreaming of the Never-land, and who were therefore nearer to him than you think: boys and girls in their nighties, and naked papooses in their baskets hung from trees.

"Do you believe?" he cried.

Tink sat up in bed almost briskly to listen to her fate.

She fancied she heard answers in the affirmative, and then again she wasn't sure.

"What do you think?" she asked Peter.

³⁰ Barrie, *Peter Pan*, 100.

³¹ Maureen Duffy, *The Erotic World of Faery* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1972), 308.

³² Jacqueline Rose, *The Case of Peter Pan or the Impossibility of Children's Fiction* (London: Macmillan, 1984), 29.

³³ Green, *Fifty Years*, 84–85.

"If you believe," he shouted to them, "clap your hands; don't let Tink die."
 Many clapped.
 Some didn't.
 A few little beasts hissed.

The clapping stopped suddenly, as if countless mothers had rushed to their nurseries to see what on earth was happening; but already Tink was saved. First her voice grew strong, then she popped out of bed, then she was flashing through the room more merry and impudent than ever. She never thought of thanking those who believed, but she would have liked to get at the ones who had hissed.³⁴

This passage establishes several points in common with the dramatized scene, and perhaps describes even more of what Barrie imaginatively envisioned in the acting. The idea of the fourth wall is made explicit, but tightly focused on the contours of Tinker Bell's little room in the wall of the Lost Boys' underground den. Once again, the idea of clapping originates with the fairy herself, while Peter's mode of address—instead of utilizing the pretense of ignoring the children who are close by in the audience—is akin to a supernatural connection to children far removed by geography but not by sensibility. Children of all races who are innocent of the burdens of adulthood respond: most with applause, some with unexplained silence, and others with hisses. Tinker Bell at first raises doubts about whether she is truly dying, for her interest in Peter's signs of distress, and the distant children's support of her, rallies her strength to the point where it calls into question whether she might have been dissembling. She seems to recover even before the verdict is in, demonstrating that she is vain, narcissistic, mercurial, capricious, and even vindictive, in the tradition of Shakespearean fairies, even in the moment of her plaintive swoon.³⁵

Peter's ability to effectively appeal for children's support, in both the play and the novel versions, epitomizes the early-nineteenth-century view of Romanticism as "an unimaginable muddle of witches, specters, systemic disorder, extravagant quests, and abuses of common sense."³⁶ A closely observant spectator—one wise to the ways of fairies—might have reason enough to doubt Tink's veracity and so take an agnostic pose, or have sense enough to know her dissembling nature and so hiss. For centuries, the sound "from innumerable tongues / A dismal universal hiss" was "the sound / Of public scorn," as Milton put it in *Paradise Lost* (book 10, l.77). Barrie gives his audiences and readers exactly the information that they need in order to distrust Tinker Bell. In the course of introducing Tinker Bell to Wendy in act 1, Peter explains, "She is quite a common girl, you know. She is called Tinker Bell because she mends the fairy pots and kettles."³⁷ Almost precisely the same explanation is given to Wendy in chapter 3 of *Peter and Wendy*:

"She is quite a common fairy," Peter explained apologetically, "she is called Tinker Bell because she mends the pots and kettles."³⁸

³⁴ J. M. Barrie, *Peter and Wendy* (1911; reprint, New York: Scribner's, 1913), 162–63.

³⁵ Nicola Bown establishes that Renaissance fairies are "amorous, quarrelsome and lyrical; the fairies of legend are sometimes mischievous, sometimes malicious, and even when they are on good terms with humans, must always be propitiated. Romantic fairies, by contrast, are often plaintive and sorrowful." *Fairies in Nineteenth-Century Art and Literature* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 9.

³⁶ Alessandro Manzoni, "Letter on Romanticism," trans. Joseph Luzzi, *PMLA* 119, no. 2 (2004): 315.

³⁷ Barrie, *Peter Pan*, 100.

³⁸ Barrie, *Peter and Wendy*, 37.

The emphasis might as well be on *Tinker Bell*, for in Scottish parlance (Barrie was a Scot) a tinker is synonymous with a gypsy,³⁹ the travelers who were racialized by Edwardians as childlike, playful, “a people who never grow up”: excitable, violently passionate, untruthful, jealous, and capable of cruelty in their vindictiveness. Peter’s character aligns with other, opposing, characteristics of gypsies (he is irreligious, imaginative, restless, chaste, generous, proud, dignified, resourceful, and mysterious), sharing with Tinker Bell the knowledge of an unfathomable language (which in the case of Scottish tinkers was a compound of Gaelic, Romani, cant, and Shelta).⁴⁰ While the enduring fascination with fairies marks Edwardian readers by turns sentimental and nostalgic, inventing a gypsy-fairy is a significant variant on Barrie’s part.

Gypsies—and thus Tinker Bell and Peter Pan—qualify as Romantic subjects, enduring throughout Victorian and Edwardian writing. Arthur Symons called gypsies “the last romance . . . left in the world,” and their strange customs, incomprehensible language, and unassimilated status marked their unique relationship to the nation-state, capitalism, and modernity.⁴¹ They were, in a sense, both metaphysically and juridically lawless.⁴² Tinker Bell’s trade—like other gypsy service trades such as chair-bottoming and caning, umbrella repair, knife-sharpening, rat-catching, and agricultural implement repair—succumbed to industrial capitalism in cities and was waning even in the remote countryside of Edwardian Britain. As a gypsy-fairy, therefore, Tinker Bell was doubly threatened: her tinker livelihood was almost obsolete and her fairy habitat was fast disappearing except in the remotest parts of the countryside, both increasingly on the fraying edges of lived memory for those in the mainstream. Celebrated in Shakespeare, the mystique of fairies was enhanced by both Romantic poets and antiquarians, their ways collected by folklorists and ethnologists, then subjected to pseudoscientific study by Victorian anthropologists and occultists.⁴³ Edwardians and their children inherited the burden of cherishing, sighting, and refuting the wee folk. By the time Barrie’s play was produced in 1904, there was a

³⁹ David MacRitchie concludes in 1894 that the ethnographic synonymy of tinker (or tinkler) and gypsy in Scotland is unproven, though widespread in popular understanding. *Scottish Gypsies Under the Stewarts* (Edinburgh: David Douglas, 1894), 5–12. There is a sufficiently well established connection that the *Oxford English Dictionary* denotatively links tinker with gypsy in Scottish and Irish usages.

⁴⁰ David Mayall, *Gypsy Identities 1500–2000: From Egipcians and Moon-men to the Ethnic Romany* (London: Routledge, 2004), 129. Mayall cites much of this list from T. W. Thompson, “Gipsies: An Account of the Character, Mode of Life, Folk-lore, and Language,” *Tramp Magazine* 2 (1910): 46–47. See also Brian Vesey-Fitzgerald, *Gypsies of Britain: An Introduction to their History* (1944; reprint, Newton Abbot: David and Charles, 1973), 32–33; and Judith Okely, *The Traveller-Gypsies* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983), 18.

⁴¹ See Mayall, *Gypsy Identities*, 140, 169; Bown, *Fairies*, 38, 91, 180.

⁴² This is in stark contrast to Wendy’s brother John, the citizen, nationalist, misogynist, and tall hat-wearing youngster who defends King Edward (later King George) against the Pirates. He is a temporary visitor to the sylvan Never Land who never entirely goes over to the Pan way of life. Never Land’s other British residents, the Lost Boys, are easily reassimilated to grimy London. Like the targets of George Smith and other would-be reformers of gypsy life, they are to be educated and integrated into the national aspirations of the British state. See Thomas Acton, *Gypsy Politics and Social Change* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1974), 113–20.

⁴³ See George Laurence Gomme, *English Traditional Lore* (London: Stock, 1885) and *Ethnology in Folklore* (New York: Appleton, 1892); William Henderson, *Notes on the Folk Lore of the Northern Counties of England and the Borders* (London: Longmans Green, 1866); and David MacRitchie, *Fians, Fairies, and Picts* (London: Kegan Paul, 1893).

formidable academic literature documenting fairies' ways, enhanced by a century's creative activity among painters and illustrators, playwrights and choreographers, novelists and composers that added to the collective imaginary.⁴⁴ The will to believe in—and to understand—fairies and their kin was, by the turn of the century, in tension with the forces of industrialization, urbanization, imperialism, and nationalism. In 1801, 66% of the population of England and Wales were rural; by 1901, 79% were urban.⁴⁵ The decline of the agricultural labor force, encroachment of industry into the countryside, and transformation of the economy from a commercial to an industrial base were all factors in urbanization. These were the same factors, as it happened, that pressured British gypsies, newly defined as an oppositional group not just temperamentally or socially but also in racialized terms, to live in cities, consent to the enforced education of their children, and find new forms of productive work.⁴⁶ No wonder that Peter clung to innocence in Never Land rather than return to London, be schooled, and later earn a living.

So, given the complicated significations of gypsies and the fairy folk in contemporaneous culture, is the audience's clapping for Tinker Bell indicative of their willing suspension of disbelief, the circumstance in which spectators agree temporarily not to deny the imitative representation inherent to mimesis? Arguably it is the opposite: spectators affirm the mimesis if they clap, and enough of them always clapped their hands for Tinker Bell to recover. Tinker Bell, the arch-faker, the hot-headed, "sensual, sexually provocative, and enticing" gypsy-fairy,⁴⁷ may cathect the audience's longing for a Romantic sensibility, but in dramatic and folkloric conventions her cunning was paired with deceit. Thus, audience members affirm the mimesis in their active creation of belief, and become complicit in the making of a mimetic act.

By alluding to the fourth wall in the novel, or seeming to break it in the play, Barrie takes poetic license. But what ensues is something other than just that. The audience's potential for disbelief is foregrounded, and in a moment of heightened emotion becomes dangerous for a sympathetic character. Clapping restores the character, resolving Tink's dilemma at the same time as producing catharsis. A negative opportunity inherent in the sentence, "Do you believe in fairies?" is resolved with a counter-affirmative. A mental relation (yes, I will clap for Tinker Bell) of identification between Peter and the audience requires a physical act from spectators.⁴⁸ By literally

⁴⁴ Crucial texts include Thomas Crofton Croker, *Fairy Legends and Traditions of the South of Ireland*, 3 vols. (London: John Murray, 1826–28); Thomas Keightley, *Fairy Mythology*, 2 vols. (London: William Harrison Ainsworth, 1828); Anna Eliza Bray, *A Description of the Part of Devonshire Bordering on the Tamar and the Tavy*, 3 vols. (London: John Murray, 1836) as well as her *A Peer at the Pixies or Legends of the West* (London: Grant, 1854).

⁴⁵ François Crouzet, *The Victorian Economy* (London: Methuen, 1982), 90.

⁴⁶ Mayall, *Gypsy Identities*; David Mayall, *Gypsy-Travellers in Nineteenth-Century Society* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988), 54–66; Diane Purkiss, *At the Bottom of the Garden: A Dark History of Fairies, Hobgoblins, and other Troublesome Things* (New York: New York University Press, 2000); Carole G. Silver, *Strange and Secret Peoples: Fairies and Victorian Consciousness* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), 3–32, 185–212; Christopher Wood, *Fairies in Victorian Art* (Woodbridge: Antique Collectors' Club, 2000); and Bown, *Fairies*, 39–97.

⁴⁷ Okely, *Traveller-Gypsies*, 201.

⁴⁸ Usually, this kind of agency is associated with the endings of narratives. Choose Your Own Adventure Books, the musical based on *The Mystery of Edwin Drood*, and the movies *Clue* and *28 Days Later* all infer that consumers have agency in the outcome of stories. Diane Purkiss has a very different

giving the audience the onus for forwarding the narrative at the climactic point, the determinism of the traditional melodramatic highlights that follow (the battle with the Pirates and the flight back to London) may be foregrounded for some spectators. Barrie, in essence, gives them the opportunity to affirm the mimesis. The choice foregrounds license. They vote on the existence of fairies—long said to be all dying out or leaving the British Isles altogether—as well as the proper custodians for belief in fairies, and thus on the status of folklore in modernity. Along with the survival of fairies, it may be implied, hinges the status of other inhabitants of Never Land: by affirming fairies, applause also affirms the right of youngsters to refuse to grow up as rationalists and utilitarians, it affirms the right of indigenous peoples to be nomads and live by their instincts in the wild, and it even affirms the Pirates' right to be lawless, seizing others' wealth rather than producing their own and engaging in battle without the protection of any country's flag. All the inhabitants of Never Land stand in opposition to Edwardian progressivism, except the Lost Boys who have already decided to return to London with the Darlings. This island's inhabitants are less evolved, in a sense, but all the more charming and seductive because of it. This is what the clappers affirm. But there are also some who hiss.

Hissing Tinker Bell

Peter Pan explicitly relies upon several traditions of the Victorian extravaganza-pantomime tradition, particularly the character list. The original production retained a brief harlequinade performed by the Twins (two of the Lost Boys) as Columbine and Harlequin, with the Darlings' diminutive maid Liza wielding the sword before the final curtain rang down.⁴⁹ Other vestiges of pantomime per se were fully integrated into the play. The convention of the pantomime boy—an active young male character played by a shapely young woman—was introduced in Regency pantomime and became enshrined in the Victorian era.⁵⁰ It parallels the travesty roles of Madame Vestris's 1830s burlesques and the Victorian extravaganzas of J. R. Planché and H. J. Byron. Peter Pan, first played by Nina Boucicault, is in the tradition of the pantomime boy, though the character's disavowal of his sexual appeal or potential is unorthodox. Peter is not a pantomime boy (except in casting) at the same time as he is not *not* a pantomime boy. The tradition of casting a female performer in this role stubbornly endured until the early 1980s.

interpretation of this passage: "For a moment, they [the children] can feel that they have in themselves the power to defeat death. It is also a brilliant reversal of pantomime conventions. Normally, [theatrical] fairies help stranded, beleaguered children. Now it is the fairy who is stranded, and the children who must use their magic to help her. . . . [O]nce the proscenium has been ruptured, once the child has become conscious of himself as a spectator, the theatricality of the entire enterprise becomes obvious. We are not being asked to make real magic; we are being asked to make technical magic, theatre magic, the fairy magic of the spectaculars. It has the same effect as the narrator's voice in the book. It makes things less real. And death on stage is always a rehearsal, a non-death, and hence a way of managing the real thing" (274). This non-death, unlike the situations in narratives, cannot have any other outcome, for no matter how much or how little an audience claps, it must be sufficient.

⁴⁹ Green, *Fifty Years*, 99.

⁵⁰ Green calls Peter "a new variant of the fairy prince" (38). I disagree. There is nothing prince-like about Peter; instead, he is like the Pechts (or Picts), a species of little people intermediate between men and fairies, who inhabited underground houses but were conquered by the Scots and believed to be extinct by the late nineteenth century. David MacRitchie, *The Testimony of Tradition* (London: Kegan Paul, 1890), 101–03.

Since the 1860s, pantomime also revolved around the dame, an elderly female character played by a male low comedian.⁵¹ *Peter Pan* lacks a dame. The year of its debut, 1904, marks a transition in the convention of the dame because its leading exponent, the droll Dan Leno, who had played dames at Drury Lane every year since 1888, had just died, as had his pantomimic partner Herbert Campbell. Instead of including a dame-like character, *Peter Pan* double-casts the ineffectual Mr. Darling with the villainous Captain Hook; Mr. Darling reappears in the last act as the abject father who has switched status roles with the family's nurse, a Newfoundland dog named Nana. After the children disappear, Darling undertakes his daily journey to and from work at the stock exchange carried aloft in Nana's kennel to signal his contrition through disgrace, and he reports that he regularly draws crowds of jeering children, and increasingly adults, too. So, the domestic side of Hook is a man content with public ridicule, emasculated by his children's nurse (a dog), and in this sense akin to the dame debased by ugliness and age.

The third pantomimic type invoked with difference is the Good Fairy, a benevolent spirit typically played by either a child or, if a speaking role, by a voluptuous woman. Tinker Bell fulfils the magical capacity of the Good Fairy and establishes the play in the tradition of the fairy extravaganza⁵² while eliminating the actress altogether.⁵³ Its innovation depends upon the radical symbolism of fairyhood—a bobbing light rather than an embodied female—in contrast to other popular illustrative conventions and stage practice at the time.⁵⁴ Figure 1, from a pantomime in the 1901–02 season, shows

⁵¹ David Mayer, *Harlequin in his Element: The English Pantomime 1806–1836* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1969), 320.

⁵² Michael R. Booth identifies this genre as a pantomime minus the harlequinade: “The supernaturalism and the intervention of benevolent and malevolent spirits remained more or less what it was, and the grand transformation—of scenery and not of characters—concluded the piece as before: a spectacular scene representing joy and happiness revealed to the audience when the fairy waves her wand.” *Prefaces to “English Nineteenth-Century Theatre”* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1980), 167.

⁵³ An actress is credited—Jane Wren—but this is one of Barrie's gags. Andrew Birkin claims that the device of “an actress moving on stage behind a giant reducing lens” was abandoned late in the rehearsal period; however, the impracticality of such an illusion makes the anecdote's authenticity questionable (J. M. Barrie and *the Lost Boys* [London, 1979], 112–14, quoted in Rose, *Case of Peter Pan*, 91–92). Tinker Bell was achieved by an offstage mirror reflecting the beam from a lighting instrument (Green, *Fifty Years*, 79). It might have been possible to direct Tinker Bell as both a speaking and flying role. Peta Tait, a historian of aerial performance, writes of how “In a 1907 poster, birds fly and the Flying Grigolatis Girls float with fairy wings in the air without any visible aerial apparatus, described as ‘the wonderful winged women of the air.’” Peta Tait, *Circus Bodies: Cultural Identity in Aerial Performance* (London: Routledge, forthcoming). While technically feasible, adapting acrobatic feats of the high wire or trapeze might have egregiously complicated the suspended flight utilized for Peter and the children. It is probably a question of logistics rather than of logic, for the proportions of an aerialist fairy would not have contradicted the conventions of pantomime fairies, though other forms of illustration usually miniaturized them (Bown, *Fairies*, 63–82) and Tinker Bell was miniaturized beyond human proportions. Instead of circus, the producers of *Peter Pan* drew upon Victorian fairy painting, which frequently emphasizes fairies' luminosity and transparency, scaling Tinker Bell down to the size of specimens in Richard Doyle's illustrations for *In Fairyland* or Richard Dadd's *Pictures from the Elf Wood*.

⁵⁴ Stage fairies were quite adaptable entities in this period. In the Hippodrome's 1906–07 aquatic Christmas entertainment, *The Treasure Ship in Fairy Seas*, for example, treasure seekers are attacked by an octopus and rescued by fairies played by the well-known swimmer Annette Kellerman and the Finney sisters.



Figure 1. Pantomime Good Fairy, "Triumph of the Magic Fan," *Illustrated London News*, 4 January 1902.



Figure 2. Pantomime fairies (children), "Feeding the Fairies Christmas Cheer Behind the Scenes," *Illustrated London News*, 27 December 1903.

the descent of the fairy *ex machina*. Fairies could be scaled down as children (figure 2) in a compromise to their truly diminutive stature in nature (figure 3). Tinker Bell was anatomically tiny while also the quintessence of magic; no Edwardian photographs of her survive, but the idea is preserved in the film of 1924 (figure 4). In the Paris Universal Exhibition of 1900, electricity reached the apotheosis of its personification as light via a fairy-form that blended femininity with kinetic incorporeality.⁵⁵ Tinker Bell evokes this icon in a radical departure from pantomime but a distinctly *moderne* technological update of the fairy.

While *Peter Pan* opts out of the convention of idealized love between the pantomime boy and the principal girl (the ingenue), or at least makes the desire for idealized domesticity unrequited, it briefly retains extravaganza's reliance upon the fairy to intervene to prevent the villain's machinations from destroying the hero. *Peter Pan's coup de théâtre* utilizes the pantomime boy's inevitable song of good cheer, in which the audience is inveigled to brighten up, along with a well-established variant on the "slightly acidulated Fairy Queen" when Peter seeks the audience's affirmation to revive the foul-mouthed Tinker Bell.⁵⁶ In Barrie's version, Peter does not sing, but in the absence of song the audience's habituated response is still strong. They reward the hero's optimism by affirming the fairy.

⁵⁵ Jane Goodall, *Performance and Evolution in the Age of Darwin* (London: Routledge, 2002), 212–13.

⁵⁶ V. C. Clinton-Baddeley, *The Burllesque Tradition in the English Theatre after 1660* (London: Methuen, 1952), 137.



Figure 3. A magical fairy bower, "Christmas Eavesdropper, the Fairies Yuletide Feast,"
Illustrated London News, 22 December 1903.

Barrie's stage directions—enshrined in the first edition of the text, published twenty-four years after the play's premiere⁵⁷—specifies that some spectators hiss at this juncture. Hissing signals belief that Tinker Bell is the villain—a defiant reading of the text against the weight of convention—though she is the pantomime boy's sidekick and the agent that enables the Darling children to go to Never Land in the first place. Never Land's wolves are menacing (act 2) and Tinker Bell is openly hostile toward Wendy, even telling the Lost Boys to shoot her out of the sky, but Captain Hook is resolutely the villain, and properly conditioned British audiences of 1904 would have hissed throughout the scene in which Hook slinks around Peter's lair and puts the poison in his bedtime medicine, just as they would have cheered when Hook is stalked by the ticking crocodile. Hissing was done to warn a pantomime boy or other

⁵⁷ The story's textual history is detailed in Harry M. Geduld, *Sir James Barrie* (New York: Twayne, 1971), 53–71.



Figure 4. Tinker Bell (as light bulb) in the Home Under the Ground, *Peter Pan* (1924).
Reproduced by permission of Kino International Corporation.

heroic character that a villain was lurking nearby,⁵⁸ as in this classic example from the melodrama *Lost in London* (1867), in which Job thwarts the villain's hopes of entrapping the ingenue:

- JOB:** I ha' sworn to stand 'tween her an' harm, an' I wull. . . . (*stops abruptly as he is re-crossing stage—listening.*) A mon's tread! an' coomin' straight up t'path! It ha' stopped now. (*A short bitter laugh.*) Ah! I had forgot the signal. (*He takes candle from table, passes it several times backwards and forwards before curtain . . .*) Now it cooms up th' path ag'in, straight for th' cottage. (*He extinguishes candle—stage in darkness—the latch of door is gently raised, the door opens, and GILBERT FEATHERSTONE enters cautiously.*)
- GILBERT:** (*as he advances, stumbles slightly.*) [Hissing from audience.] No light? (*He comes slowly down stage, as feeling his way in the dark.*) Straight! I saw the light distinctly. [More hissing] Here's a candle at last. (*Takes match from cigar case and strikes a light. Holds up match for a moment glancing about.*) A rough cage this for so pretty a bird. [More hissing] I learnt in the neighbourhood she was alone. [More hissing] (*Leans over table, lighting candle.*) It's lucky; but where's Job, I wonder?

⁵⁸ As when "a passionately interested *Michael* on the wrong side of the footlights cries out in friendly warning: 'Watch out, Peter, watch out! The old parrot's poisoned your medicine.'" Alexander Woollcott, *Shouts and Murmurs: Echoes of a Thousand and one First Nights* (New York: Century, 1922), 198–99.

(As he raises his hand, his eyes rest upon the motionless figure, and the stern eyes that are now looking direct into his own.)

JOB: Here! [The audience cheers.]⁵⁹

Job, the working-class hero, and Gilbert, the fashionable mine owner with designs on Job's wife, are recognizable types. In this climactic scene, hissing signals identification between audience and actor (against the character) and complementarities of perspective, and testifies to how an audience, as well as the actors, becomes the producer of mimesis.⁶⁰ In *Lost in London*, the dramatic irony is underscored by the audience noting their recognition of Gilbert, first silhouetted in the doorway then fumbling in the cottage, by expressing their disdain through hissing. If they wanted to actually warn the hero—in this case not necessary, since Job has set the trap for Gilbert—they would shout, “look out behind you!” These behaviors were ritualized in the reception of pantomime and extravaganza. They affirm belief in the narrative while also allowing for estrangement from absorption.

While the clapping to signal belief in fairies and revive Tinker Bell has attracted much critical attention,⁶¹ Barrie's acknowledged hissing has not attracted comment. That is a pity, because it is half of Barrie's point: it underlines Tinker Bell's ambiguity as a heroic figure, in alliance with Peter yet objecting to Wendy (and the Indian princess, Tiger Lily), and jealous lest the girls' feminine wiles might arouse Peter from boyhood and produce exogamous offspring from their gypsy community. Tinker Bell is the pivotal figure that destabilizes *Peter Pan* as an extravaganza-melodrama with normative roles, for despite her attempts to inform Peter of Wendy's status as a captured maiden, she does not play an instrumental role in her liberation from Captain Hook (act 5, scene 1).

Peter Pan was produced at Christmas 1904 to rival Drury Lane's *The White Cat*, billed as a “children's pantomime” in acknowledgement of its chief financial benefactors, but part of a long tradition of Drury Lane's pantomimes that appealed to adults, as a review stipulates:

It is a mere *façon de parler*, of course, which describes the annual at the Lane as a “children's pantomime.” Mr. Collins's business is primarily to please the “grown-ups” in his audience with broad scenes of fun, with beautiful harmonies of colour, with glittering series of spectacles.⁶²

By 1902–03, pantomime was defined as “that which converts a nursery legend into a topic *revue* and makes it an excuse for pictorial display and boisterous farce.”⁶³ Bereft of Dan Leno, Arthur Collins cast Harry Randall as the Fairy Asbestos in *The White Cat*, rolling together dame and fairy into one and maintaining Drury Lane's custom of utilizing music hall performers. *Peter Pan*'s two olio scenes, dumped after the initial season, provided similar antic opportunities for Gerald du Maurier as Hook. He

⁵⁹ Watts Phillips, *Lost in London*, in *Hiss the Villain: Six English and American Melodramas*, ed. Michael R. Booth (London: Eyre and Spottiswoode, 1964), 265–66.

⁶⁰ Actors playing villains frequently received the greatest applause in a curtain call. Audiences admired a good performance, and held no grudge against an actor for his casting.

⁶¹ See Peter Lewis, “A Note on Audience Participation and Psychological Distance,” *British Journal of Aesthetics* 25, no. 3 (1985): 274–77.

⁶² *Illustrated London News*, 31 December 1904, 979.

⁶³ *Illustrated London News*, 3 January 1903, 2.

popped through the doors of a sedan chair, reappearing each time doing impressions of another actor (Henry Irving in *The Corsican Brothers*, Beerbohm Tree in *Trilby*, and Martin Harvey in *The Only Way*) while the Home Under the Ground was being set up behind the curtain, and again when Sydney Harcourt as the pirate Starkey played his concertina and sang glumly until he was threatened with scalping, a noisy cover while the pirate ship was shifted and the nursery set restored for the final scene. Whereas pantomime still required sophistication in its playgoers, for the most part *Peter Pan* encouraged a gut-level response from children and reversion to childhood from adults. Another of *Peter Pan*'s competitors in its initial season was Laurence Hausman and Granville Barker's "play for grown-up children" *Prunella*, an extended pastoral in the tradition of Pierrot plays. Judged to be "a dainty and touching little drama calculated to please alike the most unsophisticated and the most exacting taste," it demonstrates by contrast *Peter Pan*'s crossover appeal to adults and children.⁶⁴ One thirty-three-year-old pittance wrote: "Mr Barrie writes for the children in a delightful way. Though not one myself, I felt I was that afternoon. Must see it again."⁶⁵ Max Beerbohm's notice in the *Saturday Review* deplored Barrie's confection, remarking, "In fact, his attitude towards children is the fashionable attitude, struck more saliently by him than by anyone else, and with more obvious sincerity than by the average person."⁶⁶ It is precisely Beerbohm's attitude—destroying the innocence of the young—that Barrie taunts at the moment of Tinker Bell's danger, for it is what assimilates gypsies and kills fairies.

Beerbohm was, at least inwardly, one of the hissers. He deplored the loss of adult-oriented pantomime to the fairy play, which signaled a change in adult attitudes and consumer patterns. A review of the 1905–06 Christmas season summarized the trend:

This year marks an extraordinary development in the refinement of the pantomimes, which are approximating more and more to the fairy play. The popularity of these entertainments is consequently increasing, for managers have discovered that the less there is of the old knockabout fooling, and the more of the really beautiful and fanciful, the readier the modern parent is to bring his children.⁶⁷

Peter Pan had had its premiere just one year before. It partook of this trend and Beerbohm loathed it. In a second essay on *Peter Pan*'s first season, Beerbohm recounts an at-home where he witnessed Charles Dodgson (Lewis Carroll) recounting stories to a mixed-age audience:

Other adults were present; and I, among them, sat and listened, and was, like them, entranced while Mr. Dodgson told to the hostess' little daughter, who was perched upon his knee, a succession of little tales about little children. What insight, what delicate and whimsical sympathy, was in all those little tales! I shall never forget them. Nor shall I ever forget the vacant expression on the face of the perched child, and the cry of joy with which she slid (in the midst of a story) from the perch, and rushed to meet her nurse, a sour-visaged woman, who appeared at the door, silently proclaiming bed-time.⁶⁸

⁶⁴ *Illustrated London News*, 31 December 1904, 979.

⁶⁵ Quoted in J. C. Trewin, *The Edwardian Theatre* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1976), 17.

⁶⁶ Max Beerbohm, "The Child Barrie," *Saturday Review*, 7 January 1905, 14.

⁶⁷ Caption to "Fairy Plays and Pantomimes at the London Theatres," *Illustrated London News*, 6 January 1906, 18–19. A leading exemplar would be Madge Lessing as the Fairy Queen in *Noah's Ark* at the Waldorf Theatre.

⁶⁸ Max Beerbohm, "Pantomime for Children," *Saturday Review*, 14 January 1905, 45.

Times have changed, Beerbohm implies, along with children's tastes. Adults fall for what children no longer like. Edwardian children—no longer patient with Kate Greenaway and Walter Crane—love fantasy but require a clear line between right and wrong. "Struwwelpeter," he continues (adapted for the 1900–01 season as *Shock-Headed Peter* at the Garrick), is eternally popular with children because it is moral, dwelling "especially on wrong, and on wrong's horrible results."⁶⁹ But Tinker Bell is wrong, at least in a relativistic sense. She is wrong to attack Wendy, yet right when she fends off the females who would woo Peter out of his childhood. Beerbohm would have just as soon Wendy succeeded. Jacqueline Rose argues that *Peter Pan* created a new type of theatre explicitly for children. This is an overstatement, though Beerbohm and other hissers signaled their preference for elements of the play that allied it to conventions of pantomime rather than the gentler fare attracting Edwardian children (as judged by their parents): *Bluebell in Fairyland* (Vaudeville 1901–02), *Katawumpus* (Prince of Wales's 1901–02), *The Water Babies* (Garrick 1902–03), *Snowdrop and the Seven Little Men* (Court 1903–04), and *Musical Medley* (Garrick 1904–05, based on the *Dumpy Books*, a.k.a. the stories of Little Black Sambo and Little White Barbara).

No doubt some of the applauding spectators did believe in fairies and were affirming their belief. There were probably others who did not actually believe but applauded anyway—adults, for instance. They were aware of the pretense, yet clapped in solidarity with the young, and perhaps in identification with their once-younger selves. Adults would also have been aware of two Shakespearean precedents which establish the appropriateness of applauding a fantastical character's invocation for support. Puck, in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, alone on stage in the final moment, states:

And, as I am an honest Puck,
 If we have unearned luck
 Now to scape the serpent's tongue,
 We will make amends ere long;
 Else the Puck a liar call.
 So, good night unto you all.
 Give me your hands, if we be friends,
 And Robin shall restore amends.

[5.1.431–38]

Arguably, this is an alternate ending written for performance at the public playhouse, and signals closure differently from on the occasion of an actual royal wedding.⁷⁰ In contrast to Oberon's speech "through the house give glimmering light," which concludes with a song and dance representing marital and social communion, Puck's speech is a claptrap, pure and simple, seeking an ostensible affirmation of approval. Prospero, in the epilogue to *The Tempest*, also requests applause to help accomplish his full purpose and end the play:

Now my charms are all o'erthrown,
 And what strength I have's mine own,
 Which is most faint. . . .
 But release me from my bands

⁶⁹ Ibid.

⁷⁰ Gary Jay Williams, *Our Moonlight Revels: "A Midsummer Night's Dream" in the Theatre* (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 1997), 6, 15–16.

With the help of your good hands.
 Gentle breath of yours my sails
 Must fill, or else my project fails,
 Which was to please. . . .
 As you from crimes would pardon'd be
 Let your indulgence set me free.

[Epi.1–20]

These are allusions—or intertexts—for adults, not younger children, viewing *Peter Pan*. Beerbohm implies that in *Peter Pan*, it was adults rather than children who fell for the device.⁷¹ Thus, through applause, clappers support the construct of belief in fairies and, as Gebauer and Wulf put it, evince “perspectival mimesis” in which

The subject misses its chance to realize individual interpretation by subjecting itself to an already existing interpretation. . . . A certain affinity for the interpretation already exists within the individual; but once the interpretation is accepted and realized as purportedly the subject’s own, the subject is rendered vulnerable to alien compulsions.⁷²

This amounts to allegiance not to Tinker Bell, but to oneself and the rest of the applauding audience. Anyone hissing Tinker Bell, however, dis-identifies with the mimesis (as they would also do in the case of withholding applause for Puck or Prospero’s speeches), for Peter’s invocation of faith asks for affirmation not only in the indispensability of Tinker Bell to *Peter Pan*’s plot but also to another aestheticized (mimetic) construct of the fairy world, symbolically produced in an I-and-Other relationship.⁷³ When an audience claps (yes, I do believe in fairies), there is a second mimetic citationality: not just the fiction of the play, not just the play’s Never Land relationship to Edwardian London, but also the complex discursive construct of fairies developed in nineteenth-century ethnology, literature, painting, children’s stories, and elsewhere in popular culture. And there is awareness of how this citationality is deployed.

Peter Pan builds upon a long and well-established history of reception; however, Peter’s appeal “he knows not to whom” is unorthodox (but probably not unprecedented) in the history of spectatorship. Yet as such it shows the operation of a phenomenon that transcends poetic license, differs from Brechtian *Verfremdungseffekt* and epic theatre,⁷⁴ and while dependent upon mimesis is not reducible to it. The terms of reception are transformed, creating awareness of the frames containing disbelief. This is what is inherent in the choice to clap for Tinker Bell: active creation of belief in

⁷¹ In fan mail from children to Pauline Chase, who played Peter Pan in British revivals beginning in 1906, this passage is never mentioned. Its power may have grown in the post-Edwardian era. Catherine Haill, ed., *Dear Peter Pan . . .* (London: Theatre Museum, 1983). Alexander Woollcott recounts that the advance publicity for the first American production was splattered with the line “Do you believe in fairies?” Out-of-town audiences in Washington and Buffalo “evidently did *not* believe in fairies,” and for weeks the New York audience “laughed and applauded loyally—but at disconcertingly wrong moments” (Woollcott, 187).

⁷² Gebauer and Wulf, *Mimesis*, 238.

⁷³ *Ibid.*, 315.

⁷⁴ Brecht writes in “Theatre for Pleasure or Theatre for Instruction” (1936): “The epic theatre’s spectator says: I’d never have thought it—that’s not the way—That’s extraordinary, hardly believable—It’s got to stop—The sufferings of this man appal me, because they are unnecessary—That’s great art: nothing obvious in it—I laugh when they weep, I weep when they laugh.” *Brecht on Theatre: The Development of an Aesthetic*, ed. and trans. John Willett (New York: Hill and Wang, 1957), 71.

an explicit contract between spectator and the theatrical condition. Some spectators, Barrie notes significantly, will do nothing: (*Many clap, some don't, a few hiss. . . . But Tink is saved*).

Dramatic License

If clapping for Tinker Bell exemplifies the active creation of belief, Barrie explicitly allows for ambiguity in the other responses that he notes. The active creation of belief will always triumph so Tinker Bell can accompany Peter on his next adventure. However, spectators who hiss—perhaps because Tink is so openly hostile toward Wendy as a feminine rival, perhaps because they are put off by the direct address, perhaps because they abhor the loss of raucous adult-oriented pantomime, or perhaps because they prefer the demise of the fairy world along with other bothersome human races—indicate in so doing that no, they do not believe in fairies. At least not this one. Not any more. Or not right now. Simultaneity or uniformity of experience is not required: Barrie allows for multiple reception strategies in adaptive narrative negotiation. “Answers,” writes H. Porter Abbott in a study of narrative, “that appear to emerge with closure at the level of questions will always contain traces of their opposites.”⁷⁵ This is why Susanne Langer argued in the 1950s that aesthetic distance is necessary to artistic appreciation: keep the stage action onstage, she pled, because bringing the action into the auditorium does not enhance either the illusion or the degree of absorption. Langer was not, conversely, arguing in favor of naturalism, which she regarded as spent by mid-century, for naturalism seeks to equate stage action with belief in it, neither suspending disbelief by dispensing with artifice nor deluding an audience. Thus, Langer recounted an anecdote about her first childhood theatre experience, seeing Maude Adams in *Peter Pan* (a role played by her in New York from 1905 to 1916). When “Peter turned to the spectators and asked them to attest their belief in fairies,” she bemoaned, “instantly the illusion was gone; there were hundreds of children, sitting in rows, clapping and even calling, while Miss Adams . . . spoke to us like a teacher coaching us in a play in which she herself was taking the title role.” Perhaps by the time Langer saw *Peter Pan* the device had already become old hat, an actor’s turn ritualized by repetition. “I did not understand, of course, what had happened; but an acute misery obliterated the rest of the scene, and was not entirely dispelled until the curtain rose on a new set.”⁷⁶ Adams, in other words, did not provide what Brecht calls for: an actor who “is not the subject but the demonstrator,” but instead let her own enthusiasm for the fairy’s resurrection merge with what she demonstrated about it.⁷⁷ Langer, in response, was one of the hissers.

What is significant about *Peter Pan* is that as much as it depends upon both its Romantic and Victorian legacies, it foregrounds dramatic license as a device activated in live performance for spectators to recognize and somehow respond. But, as with many kinds of license, this one has an expiration date. The 1924 silent film (figure 5), which alternates between Peter’s beseeching gestures and intertitles (“DO YOU BELIEVE?”; “Oh, say quick that you believe”; “If you believe, clap your hands . . . like

⁷⁵ H. Porter Abbott, *The Cambridge Introduction to Narrative* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 172.

⁷⁶ Susanne K. Langer, *Feeling and Form: A Theory of Art* (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1953), 318.

⁷⁷ Bertolt Brecht, “The Street Scene,” in *Brecht on Theatre*, 125.



Figure 5. Peter (Betty Bronson) “Don’t let Tinker Bell die!,” *Peter Pan* (1924).
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this!”; “Don’t let Tinker Bell die!”; “More . . . MORE! . . . That’s it!” [ellipses in original]) recalls so closely the performance dynamic that was set up to prompt enthusiastic live response.⁷⁸ Released as a cinematic Christmas entertainment in 1924–25 and 1925–26, the film effectively worked the same device as the play. Is this dramatic license if there was absolutely no chance that a preponderance of hissing could stop the film from moving inexorably across sprockets toward Tinker Bell’s recovery? No, but not because of the change in medium. The sequence had become a claptrap: through repetition, conventionalization, and the effects of time, the risk of calling attention to the spectator’s power over mimesis dissipated, the epic struggle between fairies and modernity was forgotten, John Darling’s beloved King Edward was long dead, the intertext with Edwardian pantomime was obfuscated, and instead clapping became a much-anticipated and pleasurable show of exuberance at a ritualized point in the plot. If anything, by the mid-1920s, twenty years and a full generation after the premiere, the clapping affirms believing as a cultural force—a childhood prerogative still of value in the midst of rationalism—not believing in fairies for their own sake.

⁷⁸ *Peter Pan* (1924), a Paramount Pictures release produced by Adolph Zukor and Jesse L. Laskey, starred Betty Bronson as Peter and Virginia Browne Faire as Tinker Bell (in special effect close-ups only; in other shots she was played by a lightbulb on a wire). Reissued on DVD by King Video, 1999.

Dramatic license is not the spectators' hissing (or silence, or clapping) per se, but the sequence that sets up the mimetic, intellectual, and ideological problem of belief in fairies and culminates with a response. In this sense, it resembles *Verfremdungseffekt* because spectators take an ideological position (though, arguably, clappers may have a naive response outside ideology and may not be conscious of what their response fully entails). *Peter Pan* relies upon narrative to make this possible, and utilizes the danger of live performance to foreground the seeming instability of narrative within the mimetic contract.⁷⁹ In this sense it is significantly distinct from *Verfremdungseffekt* because there is no goal of raising consciousness, and no need to do so for the dramatic license to work as a narratological negotiation. Yet neither is the device sheer technique nor the question devoid of ideology.

According to Barrie, Never Land is devoid of stories. It has music but it is Peter's thirst for narrative that draws him to huddle outside the Darling children's window to listen to their bedtime tales and then to take Wendy to the Lost Boys as their resident storyteller. These stories are the same Grimm tales (augmented with indigenous British folklore) upon which countless Victorian pantomimes were based. The tale of Peter Pan is spun in this void: like a few theatres that held out against the standard fairy tales (notably the Britannia in London's East End), Barrie's play is a narrative novelty which draws explicitly upon traditions of genre, performance, and even the season in which it was played while consciously not *not* conforming to them. Its contribution to a critical understanding of dramatic license hinges on these facts, for in the collision between an expectation and an act—or perception of an act—*Peter Pan* transformed the terms of reception, and amidst the potentials for ambiguity created awareness of the frames containing disbelief. And thus it demonstrates the essential elements of dramatic license. Audiences could retain disbelief but they could also recognize and choose the time and place for both belief and disbelief. Barrie highlights this choice. Through inviting the audience to affirm their belief in fairies—while not (according to Barrie's directive) acknowledging Peter's own belief in the audience—spectators affirmed their childhoods, for as the finale scene asserts, only the young can see fairies distinctly. Barrie proposes an alternative to the ritualized responses to Victorian pantomime while also taunting his audience to develop their own position on the extrinsic purpose of mimesis, spectatorship, and the theatrical contract. The performative circumstances of the initial 1904 production of *Peter Pan* sustained a charismatic, brutally self-absorbed, and deluded boy's faith in Never Land, inviting its audience to also engage in a game of obdurate pretense. To the extent that this was apparent—and acknowledged through resistance amidst compliance—reception was foregrounded and its terms theatricalized, not just as the lie that is the condition of theatre but also as the lie inherent in a willing suspension of disbelief.

⁷⁹ In a play about a family of lunatics, Christopher Durang makes a jest out of what might happen if Tinker Bell's danger were real. A young woman (Jane) tells her psychiatrist of a childhood memory of *Peter Pan* in which the children were told they did not clap hard enough, and despite their bleeding palms Tinker Bell died. Having been shocked by the failure of her sincerity, now as an adult Jane experiences depression and borderline personality disorder. Living where radical identity instability and random reassignment of meanings are normative, she is pushed past the point of no return and capitulates to the madness. 'identity Crisis, in *Twenty-Seven Short Plays* (n.p.: Smith and Kraus, 1995), 272. I am indebted to Daniel Smith for calling this text to my attention.