

# The Folklore of Evolution in Andrew Lang's Writings

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## ABSTRACT

This article builds upon Bernard Lightman and Peter Bowler's works on the non-Darwinian nature of Victorian evolution, arguing that while their arguments helpfully reorient our understanding of evolution's historiography, they underestimate the diversity of evolutionary theory in the Victorian era. Victorian evolution was highly idiosyncratic, as each individual (scientist, author, or reader) interpreted evolution according to his or her own preconceptions, resulting in a myriad of evolutionary theories. To illustrate this diversity, this article examines the work of Andrew Lang, a prolific late-nineteenth-century journalist, anthropologist, and fairy-tale enthusiast. I focus on two of his largely unstudied works to demonstrate how he exposed and critiqued Victorian assumptions about evolution and the origins of the theory. The first work, 'Higgins, the Inventor of Evolution' (1897), uses satire to reveal that evolution's theoretical history was often overlooked in the nineteenth century. The second, *The Princess Nobody* (1884), is a children's fairy tale that exemplifies how fairy-tale tropes can help modern readers grasp evolutionary ideas. Significantly, both works recycle older texts that also address evolutionary questions, making Lang a participant in a folkloric tradition of interpreting and critiquing evolutionary theory. Lang viewed evolutionary theory as similar to a mythic story that is told and reinterpreted through the generations. His writing demonstrates that the origins of evolutionary theory are ambiguous, and that traditional fairy tales convey ideas about human origins and kinship with animals that predate Darwin's studies.

**KEYWORDS:** Andrew Lang, evolution, fairy tales, folklore, recapitulation

In 1897, the folklorist Andrew Lang published an article entitled 'Higgins, the Inventor of Evolution,' which satirically argued that evolutionary theory had not been conceived by Charles Darwin, Herbert Spencer, or any of the great Victorian scientists, but rather by a fictive character in a 1798 periodical. Lang's article cleverly manipulates the confusion that proliferated in the mid to late nineteenth century concerning the origin and meaning of evolutionary theory.<sup>1</sup> As Peter Bowler argues, Darwinism was by no means the only or even the dominant theory of evolution in the Victorian era: 'Darwin converted the scientific world to evolutionism, but not to Darwinian evolutionism, even though some biologists proclaimed themselves to be "Darwinians".'<sup>2</sup> Evolutionary discourse was widespread, contentious, and fragmented; adherents rallied around various interpretations of the theory or synthesized their own. Bernard Lightman delineates several such interpretations, writing that 'There were at least four different versions of evolution circulating in the period from 1860 to 1900, and only one conformed to Darwin's vision.'<sup>3</sup> I suggest that while Bowler and Lightman's

<sup>1</sup> See James Moore, 'Deconstructing Darwinism: The Politics of Evolution in the 1860s', *Journal of the History of Biology*, 24 (1991), 353–408.

<sup>2</sup> Peter J. Bowler, *The Non-Darwinian Revolution: Reinterpreting a Historical Myth* (Baltimore, MD; London: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1988), p. 47.

<sup>3</sup> Bernard Lightman, 'Darwin and the Popularization of Evolution', *Notes and Records of the Royal Society*, 64 (2010), 5–24 (p. 6).

arguments helpfully re-orient our understanding of evolution's historiography, they underestimate the astonishing diversity of evolutionary theories in the Victorian era.

Lang's article, which claims to have unearthed the true (albeit fictional) inventor of evolution, not only exploits the confusion around evolutionary theories, but it also parodies the tendency of many Victorians to seek information about evolution from sources that were not always purely scientific. In other works, Lang recalled knowing about Darwin 'in the vague popular way' during his university days,<sup>4</sup> and he recognizes that 'popular Darwinism' may be different from what Darwin actually wrote.<sup>5</sup> Throughout the Victorian era, people drew evidence for their personal conceptions of evolution from a plethora of scientific, religious, literary, and cultural sources. Consequently, Victorian evolution was not only more diverse than 'Darwinism', but it was also highly idiosyncratic, as each individual (scientist, author, or reader) interpreted evolution according to his or her own preconceptions, resulting in a myriad of evolutionary theories. Lang himself provides another example, as his view of evolution was informed by his studies in anthropology and folklore, which indicates why he was particularly interested in the theory's history.

Although often overlooked today, Andrew Lang was a highly influential writer whose interpretation of evolution reflected his distinctive understanding of the relationship between imagination and science. Although his prolific writing addresses a wide variety of topics, he is primarily remembered for his work in anthropology and folklore, his enthusiastic support for writers of romance, and his collections of fairy tales for children. He believed children and romance writers retain elements of the primitive imagination, and he was convinced that the perspectives of early man, passed down to modern man through folklore and imaginative literature, reveal as much about humanity as the discoveries of science. Lang was well-acquainted with Edward Burnett Tylor's theory of cultural evolution, as well as Darwin's biological evolution, but despite his alignment with these theorists, he had his own idiosyncratic understanding of evolution. As George W. Stocking explains, Lang originally promoted Tylor's developmental view of culture, arguing that primitive animism evolved into mythology, and then into monotheistic religion. He writes in *Myth, Ritual and Religion* (1887) that mythology is 'a thing of gradual development and of slow and manifold modifications' that follows 'the general system of Evolution.'<sup>6</sup> But in the 1890s, he became convinced that monotheism had existed among primitive mankind, and was then contaminated by animism, causing a religious degeneration before the revival of monotheism in Judeo-Christianity. This explanation of spiritual beliefs, expressed in *The Making of Religion* (1898), was surprisingly similar to the anthropological theories of Max Müller, which Lang had vehemently opposed in the 1880s, and it also reflected the nonlinearity legitimized by Darwin's version of evolution.<sup>7</sup> As his arguments about the development of religion indicate, Lang believed that the processes of biological evolution also applied to the development of ideas, and in other works, he extends this argument to describe the theoretical development of evolutionary ideas.

<sup>4</sup> Andrew Lang, 'Adventures Among Books', *Scribner's Magazine*, November 1891, p. 653, in *The Unz Review* [accessed 21 November 2022].

<sup>5</sup> Andrew Lang, 'The Utilisation of Belief', *Illustrated London News*, 6 June 1891, p. 752, in *Gale Primary Sources* [accessed 5 September 2022].

<sup>6</sup> Andrew Lang, *Myth, Ritual, and Religion*, 2 vols (London: Longmans, Green, & Co., 1887), I, 36.

<sup>7</sup> George W. Stocking, *After Tylor: British Social Anthropology, 1888–1951* (Madison, WI: The University of Wisconsin Press, 1995), pp. 53–60.

In this article, I will use two of Lang's lesser-known and almost entirely unstudied works to illustrate how he exposed and critiqued Victorian assumptions about the origins of evolutionary theory, and how the modern understanding of evolution developed. I have already referenced the first work, 'Higgins, the Inventor of Evolution' (1897). The second text, *The Princess Nobody* (1884), is a children's fairy tale that addresses an evolutionary view of humanity's origins, man's relationship with animals, mutual aid, and the role of fairy tales in developing scientific ideas. 'Higgins' has as yet attracted no scholarly attention, while *The Princess Nobody* has received some analysis from Roger Lancelyn Green and Jan Susina. Although these overlooked texts belong to distinctly different genres, they make similar statements about evolution, bringing useful clarity to our understanding of Lang's views on the theory. The content of these texts reflects an awareness of evolutionary ideas and the development of evolutionism, but their composition also recapitulates the process of evolution. In the Victorian era, many evolutionists espoused recapitulation theory, which posited that embryonic and child development reiterates the evolution of the species. Analogously, 'Higgins' and *The Princess Nobody* recycle older texts that also address evolutionary questions, making them textual recapitulations. Lang envisions evolutionary theory as a mythic story that has been inherited by generations of thinkers and reiterated into new forms at each stage, just as biological traits are inherited and adapted with each generation of a species. This process is reflected in the textual composition of 'Higgins' and *The Princess Nobody*, which both reiterate evolutionary ideas from prior literature. Through their accumulation and reinterpretation of past forms, the ontogenetic creation of these individual texts recapitulates the phylogenetic development of evolutionary theory itself. By exposing and perpetuating the intellectual history of evolutionism, Lang demonstrates that writing on evolution can take many forms – including scientific text, satirical article, and fairy tale – that all contribute to our understanding of the theory.

Many critics have noted Lang's interdisciplinary approach and his tendency to apply similar methods to a variety of intellectual pursuits.<sup>8</sup> In this article, I demonstrate another instance of this interdisciplinarity, as Lang uses seemingly disparate genres – a satirical article and a children's story – to convey an anthropological understanding of the development of evolutionary theory. In their studies of Lang's anthropological writings, critics like George W. Stocking, Efram Sera-Shriar, and Kathy Psomiades have thoroughly discussed his views on the evolution of religion.<sup>9</sup> There has also been important work on how Lang applies his anthropological framework to literary studies; for instance, Julia Reid has shown how Lang's celebration of romance is grounded in his belief in the value of savage survivals. She writes, 'Lang drew attention to the fluidity of the creative process, saluting its ability to cross the barriers that were being erected between popular and elite cultures, oral and written traditions,

<sup>8</sup> See Andrew Teverson, Alexandra Warwick, and Leigh Wilson, 'General Introduction', in *The Edinburgh Critical Edition of the Selected Writings of Andrew Lang* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2015), pp. 9–16 (p. 11); Leigh Wilson, "'There the Facts Are': Andrew Lang, Facts and Fantasy", *Journal of Literature and Science*, 6 (2013), 29–43 (p. 29); Nathan K. Hensley, 'What is a Network? (And Who is Andrew Lang?)', *Romanticism and Victorianism on the Net*, 64 (2013), n. page.

<sup>9</sup> Stocking, *After Tylor*; Efram Sera-Shriar, *Psychic Investigators: Anthropology, Modern Spiritualism, and Credible Witnessing in the Late Victorian Age* (Pittsburgh, PA: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2022); Kathy Alexis Psomiades, 'Hidden Meaning: Andrew Lang, H. Rider Haggard, Sigmund Freud, and Interpretation', *Romanticism and Victorianism on the Net*, 64 (2013).

amateur and professional authorship, and plagiarism and originality.<sup>10</sup> My analysis applies these scholarly arguments to Lang's understanding of the development of evolutionism, revealing how he blurs boundaries between fiction and science, and between primitive and modern ways of thinking. For Lang, evolution is an idea that, like religion, has its origins in mankind's earliest ancestors and the stories they told, but has also evolved and been adapted over the centuries.

In 'Higgins, the Inventor of Evolution' and *The Princess Nobody*, Lang takes an anthropological approach to evolution, examining not only its claims but also the development of the theory itself. He argues that evolution is not an invention of the nineteenth century; rather, traditional fairy tales convey ideas about human origins and kinship with animals that resonate with Darwin's studies. Lang's writings demonstrate that the origins of evolutionary theory are ambiguous, warning that any attempt to trace its history back to a single author is futile. His understanding of evolution equates it to folklore, a view that many would see as undermining the theory's empiricism. But for Lang, folklore was a field that should be studied empirically, like science,<sup>11</sup> and so his equation of folklore and evolution reaffirmed rather than undermined the theory's empiricism. His goal was not to challenge the validity of evolution, but to illustrate that this idea had developed in mankind's understanding for centuries. In *The Making of Religion*, Lang argues that the earliest people had an idea of God that later re-emerged in Judaism and Christianity: 'our religion, even granting that it arose out of primitive fallacies and false hypotheses, may yet have been refined, as science has been, through a multitude of causes, into an approximate truth.'<sup>12</sup> Similarly, through 'Higgins' and *The Princess Nobody*, Lang shows that evolutionary theory has developed, but also that its central tenets originate in humanity's earliest beliefs. Lang affirms evolution as an integral part of the human experience, making species transformation a central truth about humanity that has been accepted for centuries.

### 1. 'HIGGINS, THE INVENTOR OF EVOLUTION': SATIRE AND THE FOLKLORE OF EVOLUTION

Although the 'Higgins' article was published 13 years after *The Princess Nobody*, it provides a better starting point for my discussion, as it clearly expresses Lang's belief that evolutionary theory is not a modern invention, but rather a longstanding idea with a complicated (and often surprising) genealogy. This short, four-paragraph article is a satire of a satire in which Lang claims that a person called 'Mr. Higgins' discovered evolution:

It is indeed a common error of 'the averagely well-read man'; as you quote in Grant Allen, to credit Darwin with having invented 'The Theory of Evolution.' The name of Higgins is (in this connexion) forgotten by the averagiously ignorant citizen, yet I claim for Higgins priority to Mr. Darwin, and even to Mr. Spencer. In fact, unless one of these *savants* published his theory before April 1798, there can be no doubt about the matter.<sup>13</sup>

<sup>10</sup> Julia Reid, "King Romance" in *Longman's Magazine: Andrew Lang and Literary Populism*, *Victorian Periodicals Review*, 44 (2011), 354–76 (p. 359). See also Sebastian Lecourt, *Cultivating Belief: Victorian Anthropology, Liberal Aesthetics, and the Secular Imagination* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018), pp. 164–92; Robert Michalski, "Towards a Popular Culture: Andrew Lang's Anthropological and Literary Criticism", *Journal of American Culture*, 18 (1995), 13–17.

<sup>11</sup> See Sera-Shriar's discussion in *Psychic Investigators of Lang's Cock Lane and Common Sense* (1894).

<sup>12</sup> Andrew Lang, *The Making of Religion* (London: Longmans, Green, & Co., 1898), p. 51.

<sup>13</sup> Andrew Lang, 'Higgins, the Inventor of Evolution', *The Academy*, 13 February 1897, p. 214, in *ProQuest: British Periodicals* [accessed 3 August 2022].

Lang published this article in *The Academy*, submitting it with the following letter to the editor: ‘Sir, I seldom interfere in questions of Evolution, but the enclosed note demonstrates that Higgins was the inventor. The original is in *Poetry of the Antijacobins* p. 127, Note.’<sup>14</sup> Lang’s interest in evolution generally inclined toward the development of culture and folklore, while the ‘Higgins’ article focuses on the evolution of biological life. Despite his foray into less familiar territory, he mockingly insinuates that he possesses a better understanding of evolution than Grant Allen, a well-known popularizer of evolution. Lang briefly quotes Allen’s 1888 essay ‘Evolution’, which complains that what the ‘averagely well-read man’ believes about evolution is ‘popular fallacy of the wildest description.’<sup>15</sup> Pointing to the writings of Immanuel Kant, Pierre-Simon Laplace, Erasmus Darwin, Charles Lyell, Jean-Baptiste Lamarck, and Herbert Spencer, Allen insists that Darwin was not the originator of evolution, but rather that evolution ‘is a very ancient and respectable theory.’<sup>16</sup> Lang challenges and builds upon Allen’s historiography, unearthing another layer of evolution’s history, albeit a fictional one.

Although Lang’s article is ironic in tone, it might require a more than ‘averagely’ well-educated reader to trace the satire to its source. ‘Higgins’ was a character created by the editors of *The Anti-Jacobin Review*, a conservative periodical from the late 1790s. John Strachan explains, ‘Mr. Higgins, poet and dramatist, supposedly writes some of the major parodies of the *Poetry of the Anti-Jacobin* . . . He is presented as an indefatigable radical who uses literature . . . to propagandize for the Jacobin cause.’<sup>17</sup> In his article, Lang quotes from Higgins’ poem ‘The Loves of the Triangles’, which parodies Erasmus Darwin’s poem ‘The Loves of the Plants’ (1793). ‘The Loves of the Triangles’ was included in *Poetry of the Anti-Jacobin* (1799), a collection of poetry from the periodical. As Lang relates, Higgins explains how protoplasm began ‘to ramify, and its viviparous offspring would diversify their forms and habits, so as to conform themselves to their various *incunabula*.’<sup>18</sup> Higgins, as quoted by Lang, continues:

Upon this view of things, it seems highly probable that the first effort of Nature terminated in the production of Vegetables, and that these, being abandoned to their own *energies*, by degrees detached themselves from the surface of the earth and supplied themselves with wings or feet . . . Others by an inherent disposition to society and civilization, and by a stronger effort of *volition*, would become Men. These, in time, would restrict themselves to the use of their *hind feet*: their *tails* would gradually rub off, by sitting in their cave, or huts, as soon as they arrived at a domesticated state: they would invent *language*.<sup>19</sup>

This quotation heavily relies on Erasmus Darwin’s theory of evolution, which similarly first appears in a footnote to ‘The Loves of the Plants’, and in fact, *Poetry of the Anti-Jacobin* references Darwin, stating that Higgins’ theory is like the ‘manner in which Dr. Darwin has traced

<sup>14</sup> Andrew Lang, letter to editor of *The Academy*, 6 February 1897, St Andrews Library Special Collections, ms39003.

<sup>15</sup> Grant Allen, ‘Evolution’, *The Cornhill Magazine*, January 1888, pp. 34–47 (p. 34), in *ProQuest: British Periodicals* [accessed 25 October 2022].

<sup>16</sup> Allen, ‘Evolution’, p. 34.

<sup>17</sup> John Strachan, ‘Poetry of the Anti-Jacobin’, in *A Companion to Romanticism*, ed. by Duncan Wu (Oxford: Blackwell, 1998), pp. 191–98 (p. 194).

<sup>18</sup> *Poetry of the Anti-Jacobin* (Printed for J. Wright, Piccadilly, 1799), p. 118.

<sup>19</sup> *Poetry of the Anti-Jacobin*, p. 119. See also Lang, ‘Higgins’, p. 214, emphasis original.

the whole of the organized creation to his Six Filaments.<sup>20</sup> In ‘The Loves of the Plants’, Darwin suggests that evolutionary change occurs ‘to accommodate [animals] to new ways of procuring their food’,<sup>21</sup> and likewise, Higgins emphasizes the role of the environment, or ‘incubula’. But just as Higgins replicates Darwin’s theory, so Lang carefully preserves Higgins’ text. Much of Lang’s article is a direct quotation from *The Anti-Jacobin*, copied with meticulous accuracy. By overtly recycling ‘The Loves of the Triangles’, Lang restores its place in the historiography of evolution.

Intriguingly, Lang does not acknowledge Erasmus Darwin’s role in the discovery of evolution. Rather, he joins *The Anti-Jacobin*’s satire, producing a textual recapitulation that traces the lineage of evolution back to a parodic character. Lang’s failure to identify Darwin seems less likely a mistake than a recognition that the origins of evolutionary theory are even more complex than Grant Allen argued. In the article, Lang suggests that Spencer was merely ‘following Higgins’, copying his theory ‘nearly word for word’.<sup>22</sup> He lists several of Higgins’ ideas that predate Spencer, including change in response to environment and the ‘infinite series of ages’ needed for such evolution.<sup>23</sup> His analysis continues, ‘If this is not “the Theory of Evolution”, or a theory of it, I don’t know what it is. There is here no pitiful accumulation of mere peddling facts’ (emphasis original).<sup>24</sup> Higgins’ ideas are significant and logically explained, demonstrating that substantive evolutionary theories existed long before Charles Darwin or Spencer. Of course, Lang is simultaneously mocking the ways in which evolution is presented as an empirical, well-documented theory. The tonal ambiguity of this text, which balances satire with serious critique, exposes the complexity of evolutionary ideas, which cannot be collated into a singular ‘Theory of Evolution’. Similarly, there is no single person who can be labelled ‘the inventor of evolution’ – even fictional characters play a role in evolutionary theorizing. The process of tracing the theory back through the years reveals multiple origins, inventors, and meanings – a discovery further exposed by Lang’s use of satire, a genre that multiplies and conflates meaning. In his article on satire and evolutionary theory, James G. Paradis writes, ‘This freedom – indeed irresponsibility – which empowers the ironist to use reduction and to record conflict without resolving it, also made possible the wide-spread participation of Victorians at different levels in the science-generated intellectual traffic of the day.’<sup>25</sup> In this light, Lang is not responsible for correcting the average Victorian’s understanding of evolution, and this freedom allows him to ‘record’ but not ‘resolve’ a debate about the history of evolutionary theory. As he participates in *The Anti-Jacobin*’s satire, he exposes the problems involved in tracing evolutionary ideas to their origin.

The evolutionary lineage that Lang implies at the beginning of his article – Higgins to Herbert Spencer to Charles Darwin – destabilizes readers’ assumptions about what evolutionary theory is: Darwinian or Spencerian or perhaps even Higginsian. Like folklore, evolution has been passed down generations, with successive ‘storytellers’ dropping, adding, and rewriting different aspects of the theory. Gillian Beer highlights this quality of evolution in her comment about the ‘fictive’ nature of theory, and similarly George Levine observes that

<sup>20</sup> *Poetry of the Anti-Jacobin*, p. 118.

<sup>21</sup> Erasmus Darwin, *The Botanic Garden. The Loves of the Plants* (Printed for J. Johnston, London, 1791).

<sup>22</sup> Lang, ‘Higgins’, p. 214.

<sup>23</sup> Lang, ‘Higgins’, p. 214.

<sup>24</sup> Lang, ‘Higgins’, p. 214.

<sup>25</sup> James G. Paradis, ‘Satire and Science in Victorian Culture’, in *Victorian Science in Context*, ed. by Bernard Lightman (Chicago, IL: The University of Chicago Press, 1997), pp. 143–75 (p. 148).

'Darwin's story' 'did not emerge from nowhere.'<sup>26</sup> As Leigh Wilson argues, Lang upheld the supremacy of facts and approached the study of folklore as empirically as possible. But in 'Higgins', strict observance of the facts involves recognizing the role that many people have played in the development of evolutionary theory. Wilson observes that Lang's writing often 'remak[es] facts so that they have within them effects beyond the possibilities of empiricism; indeed, so that they contain within them the fantasised world of the literary.'<sup>27</sup> By looking at evolutionary theory through the empirical light of anthropology, evolution is not simplified but instead becomes a story in which even fictional characters play a role. Just as literary texts build upon other texts (as Lang builds upon 'The Loves of the Triangles', which in turn is derived from Darwin's 'The Loves of the Plants'), evolutionists also develop each other's ideas. 'Higgins, the Inventor of Evolution' reminds readers of the ubiquity of evolutionary ideas and that each version of evolution is 'invented' in the mind of a human, a sober warning that the theory can be easily misconstrued, reinterpreted, or entirely fabricated.

In its composition, 'Higgins' recapitulates Grant Allen's article, Spencer's writings, and 'The Loves of the Triangles', which reiterates Erasmus Darwin's 'The Loves of the Plants'. The text itself becomes an ontogenetic representation of the phylogenetic development of evolutionary theory. Lang's satirical depiction of evolution disconnects it from pure empiricism, aligning it instead with the imaginative qualities of folklore, and he was not alone in this interpretation. For many Victorian writers, fairy tales became a surprisingly apt way to think about and figure the impact of evolutionary theory. Several critics have examined how writers like Arabella Buckley used fairy tales to popularize evolution, particularly for young audiences.<sup>28</sup> But as Melanie Keene argues, scientific fairy tales were more than 'an attractive means of packaging new facts for Victorian children'; they were also 'an important new way in which nineteenth-century Britons enthused about, communicated, and criticized the sciences.'<sup>29</sup> In the following section, I will analyse how Lang utilized the fairy tale to grapple with evolutionary questions about human knowledge, kinship with animals, and sociality versus struggle. As he does in 'Higgins', Lang undermines the notion that evolutionary theory is a nineteenth-century invention, suggesting instead that fairy tales have been used for centuries as vehicles of evolutionary ideas.

## 2. THE PRINCESS NOBODY: NARRATIVE HISTORY AND CHILD RECAPITULATION

In 1884, Lang published a fairy tale for children called *The Princess Nobody*, written to accompany illustrations by the late Richard Doyle. Despite his interest in folklore, Lang had not previously published any fairy tales himself, although he would later become famous for his series of coloured Fairy Books. *The Princess Nobody* opens with the fairy tale convention of royal parents who are unable to have children. When the queen finally gives birth to a princess, whom they call Niente (Italian for 'nothing'), the king realizes that he has unintentionally

<sup>26</sup> Gillian Beer, *Darwin's Plots: Evolutionary Narrative in Darwin, Eliot, and Nineteenth-Century Fiction*, 3rd edn (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), p. 1; George Levine, *Darwin and the Novelists: Patterns of Science in Victorian Fiction* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1988), p. 2.

<sup>27</sup> Wilson, "'There the Facts Are'", p. 32.

<sup>28</sup> See Bernard Lightman, *Victorian Popularizers of Science: Designing Nature for New Audiences* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2007); Melanie Keene, *Science in Wonderland: The Scientific Fairy Tales of Victorian Britain* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015); Laurence Talarach-Vielmas, *Fairy Tales, Natural History and Victorian Culture* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014).

<sup>29</sup> Keene, *Science in Wonderland*, pp. 18–19.

promised his child to a mischievous dwarf. Inevitably, the dwarf demands Niente, and her parents send her to a hidden place of protection, from whence she can only be returned by a brave prince. Overcome with longing to see their daughter, the king and queen recruit an army of princes to rescue her, promising that the successful hero will have her hand in marriage. The story then recounts the quest of Prince Comical as he searches Fairyland for the Princess Niente. Although ‘Higgins’ is a satirical article and *The Princess Nobody* is a fairy tale, the two texts analogously engage with evolutionary ideas, both implying that evolution is a mythic story that existed before nineteenth-century science. But while ‘Higgins’ only traces the development of evolution back to the late eighteenth century, *The Princess Nobody* suggests that evolutionary ideas originate in the ancient folklore of mankind. Like ‘Higgins’, *The Princess Nobody* is a textual recapitulation whose composition mimics the development of evolutionary theory. Through its reinterpretation of Doyle’s illustrations, it exemplifies the process by which evolution, both biological and cultural, occurs.

*The Princess Nobody* is notably unlike Lang’s definition of the traditional fairy story. Although it draws from ancient folklore, its fanciful tone marks it as a literary fairy tale, a modern genre that Lang considered inferior to traditional fairy tales. He wrote in ‘Literary Fairy Tales’ that ‘[w]e can never quite recover the old simplicity, energy, and romance’ of ‘the ancient popular fairy tale.’<sup>30</sup> Lang disliked literary fairy tales because they often alluded to modern issues. For instance, he writes of Charles Kingsley’s *The Water-Babies* (1863) that it is ‘a fairy tale much too full of science, and of satire not very intelligible to children, and not always entertaining to older people.’<sup>31</sup> Lang criticized modern retellings of folklore, questioning ‘whether the process of embellishing is perfectly fair in the case of stories that are now so rare, and are, in a way so ancient, and even sacred, as popular tales.’<sup>32</sup> In this context, his decision to write *The Princess Nobody* is a pivotal moment in his career that marks his transition from an opponent of literary fairy tales to a writer of them himself. The significance of *The Princess Nobody* is not explored by his early biographer, Roger Lancelyn Green, who notes a shift in Lang’s opinion on literary fairy tales but offers no explanation for this change.<sup>33</sup> More recently, Jan Susina comments that Lang’s interest in this project is ‘surprising’, arguing that Lang ‘was willing to suspend his scholarly approach to folklore for the pleasures of Doyle’s version of the fairy world.’<sup>34</sup> However, Lang’s motivation for writing *The Princess Nobody* is more explicable in light of his theory about imagination, children, and evolutionary relapse.

In 1898, Lang called Charles Dickens ‘a relapse on the early human intellectual condition’, applauding the author’s ability to access primitive imagination.<sup>35</sup> He associated Dickens’ ‘intense power of imaginative vision and audition’ with animistic, ‘primeval faculties’, and in Lang’s view, such primitivism was admirable.<sup>36</sup> Lang believed that most

<sup>30</sup> Andrew Lang, ‘Literary Fairy Tales’, in *The Edinburgh Critical Edition of the Selected Writings of Andrew Lang*, vol. 1, ed. by Andrew Teverson, Alexandra Warwick, and Leigh Wilson (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2015), pp. 126–30 (pp. 129, 127).

<sup>31</sup> Lang, ‘Literary Fairy Tales’, p. 128.

<sup>32</sup> Andrew Lang, ‘Contes du Roi Gambrinus’, *The Academy*, 16 May 1874, pp. 540–41 (p. 540), in *ProQuest: British Periodicals* [accessed 29 May 2023].

<sup>33</sup> Roger Lancelyn Green, *Andrew Lang: A Critical Biography with a Short-Title Bibliography of the Works of Andrew Lang* (Leicester, Edmund Ward, 1946) p. 84.

<sup>34</sup> Jan Susina, “Like the Fragments of Coloured Glass in a Kaleidoscope”: Andrew Lang Mixes Up Richard Doyle’s *In Fairyland*, *Marvels & Tales*, 17 (2003), 100–119 (pp. 101, 106).

<sup>35</sup> Andrew Lang, ‘Charles Dickens’, *Fortnightly Review*, December 1898, p. 948, in *ProQuest: British Periodicals* [accessed 28 August 2022].

<sup>36</sup> Lang, ‘Charles Dickens’, p. 948.



modern people lack the imaginative genius of early mankind, but he made an exception for certain literary figures, as well as for children. In the introduction to *The Blue Fairy Book* (1889), he writes, ‘The children to whom and for whom [fairy tales] are told represent the young age of man.’<sup>37</sup> He supported this association with recapitulation theory, a widespread notion that childhood development mimicked the evolution of the human species. Reid explains:

Accepting the common belief that children recapitulated humankind’s racial development, [Lang] inverted evolutionists’ hierarchies, idealizing childhood as an imaginative Arcady, and mourning the loss of the child’s powers in all but ‘men of genius.’ In this way, he used his evolutionary science to underwrite the neo-Romantic nostalgia for childhood.<sup>38</sup>

As Reid observes, Lang’s understanding of recapitulation was unusual in that he saw the development from childhood to adulthood as a loss, rather than a progressive change.

For many literary critics, such as Lang’s frequent antagonist W. D. Howells, romance and fairy tales were obsolete literary genres due to their association with primitivism and childhood. Caroline Sumpter, however, rightly argues that Lang ‘rejected Howells’s value judgments about the commercial vulgarity of fantasy’ and instead celebrated Dickens’s work as ‘a form of folkloric survival.’<sup>39</sup> Sumpter argues that Lang wanted to ‘pla[y] a role in the legitimization of popular fiction as a scholarly field’, but I suggest that Lang also intended to promote evolutionary regression.<sup>40</sup> He believed that the imagination of children would fade from modern consciousness if not nurtured, and consequently, he became a proponent of ‘relapse.’ He repeatedly insists that fairy tales offer a way of perceiving true reality, a valuable perspective on the verge of extinction among modern humanity. In ‘Modern Fairy Tales’, he argues that fairy tales are “full of matter”, and unobtrusively teach the true lessons of our wayfaring in a world of perplexities and obstructions.<sup>41</sup> This perspective informs *The Princess Nobody*, which demonstrates how fairy tales convey important ideas about humanity’s origins. By reading imaginative literature, individuals activate the perspective of early humanity, relapsing to a more primitive understanding of the world. As Lang grew convinced of the need for relapse, his opinion of literary fairy tales shifted, and he eventually concluded that any effort to preserve children’s primitive genius was worthwhile.

*The Princess Nobody* thus marks the beginning of Lang’s campaign to provide children with an education that preserves primitive imagination by arresting their intellectual recapitulation. This development in his thought, as well as the origins of *The Princess Nobody* more generally, has been entirely neglected by Lang scholars. Green’s discussion of *The Princess Nobody* focuses on Lang’s partnership with Longman’s, Green, and Co.:

The book seems to have been suggested to him by his friend and publisher, Charles Longman. For the firm had published in 1869 a tall, slim, green volume called *In*

<sup>37</sup> *The Blue Fairy Book*, ed. by Andrew Lang (London: Longman’s, Green, and Co., 1889), p. xi.

<sup>38</sup> Reid, “King Romance” in *Longman’s Magazine*, p. 359.

<sup>39</sup> Caroline Sumpter, ‘Devulgarizing Dickens: Andrew Lang, Homer and the Rise of Psycho-Folklore’, *ELH*, 87 (2020), 733–59 (pp. 739, 753).

<sup>40</sup> Sumpter, ‘Devulgarizing Dickens’, p. 755.

<sup>41</sup> Andrew Lang, ‘Modern Fairy Tales’, *Illustrated London News*, 3 December 1892, p. 714, in *Gale Primary Sources* [accessed 28 August 2022].

*Fairyland: Pictures from the Elf World* . . . It made a very attractive volume, and the pictures have a fascination and a charm that is all their maker's own – but it was hardly a children's book.<sup>42</sup>

*In Fairyland* was composed of illustrations by Richard Doyle and a poem by William Allingham, and it was one of the largest colour books in the Victorian era – ‘an expensive and lavish production, to sell for one and a half guineas.’<sup>43</sup> According to Rodney Engen, the publishers worried that Doyle's illustrations ‘lacked a narrative thread’, so Allingham was commissioned to unite the pictures with verse.<sup>44</sup>

*In Fairyland* was well received by reviewers, but it was the illustrations rather than Allingham's poetry that captured readers' imaginations. A reviewer in *The Times* enthused, ‘At the head of our list to-day stands a book of a purely imaginative character, and one which fairly carries us out of this dull prosaic world into the region of fancy.’<sup>45</sup> The entire review describes the illustrations, aside from the brief acknowledgement: ‘Parallel with the illustrations run the stanzas of a fanciful poem by Mr. W. Allingham, most appropriate to the subject.’<sup>46</sup> Possibly, Charles Longman realised that Allingham's poetry had not aligned with the whimsical spirit needed to make the book widely appealing. As Susina observes, the book's expensive price ‘suggested it was being marketed primarily as an art book rather than a children's book.’<sup>47</sup> Wanting to capitalize on the success of Doyle's illustrations with a cheaper and more child-friendly edition, Longman turned to his friend Andrew Lang. An advertisement in *Longman's Magazine* for *The Princess Nobody* supports this conclusion: ‘It is believed that young children will enjoy the drawings even more when connected by a narrative than when left “in the air”.’<sup>48</sup> Lang's story is thus a textual recapitulation that appropriates both ancient fairy tale tropes and Doyle's illustrations, sparking imaginative regression and perpetuating the passage of folklore through the generations.

The dedicatory poem that begins *The Princess Nobody* further indicates that Lang has adopted the folkloric tradition to stimulate primitive imagination. In the poem, he dedicates the book to the ‘babes at Branxholm Park’ (line 1).<sup>49</sup> Branxholm Park was a house located near Lang's hometown of Selkirk, and in the 1880s, it was inhabited by the family of Lang's sister-in-law, Elizabeth Willing Grieve. Lang wrote *The Princess Nobody* for her many children, perhaps testing the story on them before publication. The dedication hints that this is a practice fairy tale: ‘Now, if my nonsense hits the mark . . . Another time, perchance, I'll prate, / And keep a merry coil’ (p. 7, lines 17–22). Lang had many child friends, and he encouraged what he saw as their primitive genius. A friend of his, Ella Christie, recalled, ‘His kindness extended to mothers of fancied prodigies whose literary efforts I have seen him wade through and then reply to in as kindly a tone as possible.’<sup>50</sup> In *The Princess Nobody*, Lang not

<sup>42</sup> Green, *Andrew Lang*, pp. 86–87.

<sup>43</sup> Rodney K. Engen, *Richard Doyle* (Stroud: The Catalpa Press, 1983), p. 155.

<sup>44</sup> Engen, *Richard Doyle*, p. 157.

<sup>45</sup> ‘Christmas Books’, *The Times*, 2 December 1884, p. 4, in *The Times Digital Archive* [accessed 4 September 2022].

<sup>46</sup> ‘Christmas Books’, p. 4.

<sup>47</sup> Susina, “‘Like the Fragments of Coloured Glass in a Kaleidoscope’”, p. 105.

<sup>48</sup> ‘Advertisement’, *Longman's Magazine*, 1882–1905, October 1884, p. 6, in *ProQuest: British Periodicals* [accessed 4 September 2022].

<sup>49</sup> Andrew Lang, *The Princess Nobody: A Tale of Fairyland* (London: Longmans, Green, and Co., 1884), p. 7. Further references to this edition are given in parentheses in the text and abbreviated to PN.

<sup>50</sup> Ella Christie and Alice King Stewart, *A Long Look at Life: By Two Victorians* (London: Seely, Service & Co., 1940), p. 162.

only encouraged his child acquaintances but also attempted, for the first time, to nurture the imagination of a wider reading audience.

Since *The Princess Nobody* is a work intended to encourage the primitive imagination of children, it is unsurprising that the story utilizes ancient fairy tale conventions and portrays humans as more likely to experience or believe in the supernatural than modern man. Susina argues that ‘Lang was a tireless recycler of preexisting material’ who believed that all fairy tales were composed by shaking a kaleidoscopic assortment of incidents into new arrangements.<sup>51</sup> By incorporating various fairy tale tropes, Lang builds upon the folkloric tradition of recycling earlier stories. *The Princess Nobody* is based on an old fairy tale trope of parents accidentally giving away their first-born child – a theme that appears in the folklore of many cultures. One of the most well-known examples is the story of Rumpelstiltskin, but a version Lang might have been particularly familiar with is the Scottish tale Whuppity Stoorie (or Whippitie Stourie). As a boy growing up in the Borders, Lang may have been told Whuppity Stoorie by his own nurse, who was remembered by family members as ‘old and very Scotch’.<sup>52</sup> *The Princess Nobody* incorporates several other tropes as well, such as the frog-into-prince motif and the myth of Cupid and Psyche (with the genders reversed). As I have mentioned, Lang disliked the tendency of literary fairy stories to address contemporary issues, but despite this aversion, *The Princess Nobody* is influenced by and responds to an evolutionary view of the world. Through this story, Lang demonstrates that modern science has re-discovered information about humanity that traditional fairy tales have conveyed for centuries.

### 3. EVOLUTIONARY THEORY IN *THE PRINCESS NOBODY*

In writing *The Princess Nobody*, Lang first acknowledges the evolutionary ideas expressed in Doyle’s illustrations from 1869, which blur distinctions between children and fairies, who both share features with insects and birds. For instance, in one picture, the baby princess is sandwiched between two owls and appears remarkably bird-like herself (Figure 1). These resemblances between animal and human (or human-like fairies) reflect the fact that the illustrations were originally drawn in the decade following Darwin’s *On the Origin of Species* (1859). Doyle’s extensive social circles included several scientific figures, and he was aware of the impact of science on Victorian society. In his drawing ‘Science and Art Conversazione’ (1861–62), a crowd including Michael Faraday and John Tyndall throng around tables full of scientific specimens and documents.<sup>53</sup> Doyle’s work also suggests the influence of Victorian artists such as John Anster Fitzgerald. Nicola Bown remarks that ‘Fitzgerald’s pictures are remarkable for the complete integration of the fairies and their natural setting’,<sup>54</sup> and Doyle likewise depicts fairies as beings in communion with nature. In 1884, reviewers of *The Princess Nobody* acknowledged this natural portrayal of fairies; as a reviewer in *The Times* remarks, ‘There are elves disporting themselves in the foliage and among the flowers, living in eccentric familiarity with the brute creation, and playing all manner of fantastic tricks with such volatile playmates as butterflies and daddy-longlegs’.<sup>55</sup> The reviewer seems torn between amusement and discomfort at such scenes of ‘eccentric familiarity’ with ‘brute creation’ and ‘volatile playmates’, suggesting that he is unconvinced by this harmonious picture and perhaps sees nature from a more Darwinian perspective.

<sup>51</sup> Susina, “‘Like the Fragments of Coloured Glass in a Kaleidoscope’”, p. 109.

<sup>52</sup> E.M. Sellar, *Recollections and Impressions* (London: William Blackwood and Sons, 1908), p. 112.

<sup>53</sup> Engen, *Richard Doyle*, p. 134.

<sup>54</sup> Nicola Bown, *Fairies in Nineteenth-Century Art and Literature* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), p. 114.

<sup>55</sup> ‘Christmas Books and Gift-Books’, *The Times*, 6 December 1869, p. 4, in *The Times Digital Archive* [accessed 4 September 2022].



**Figure 1:** The Princess and the birds. Public Domain. Andrew Lang, *The Princess Nobody: A Tale of Fairyland* (London: Longmans, Green, and Co., 1884), p. 14.

Exactly what a Darwinian perspective entails, however, was by no means consistent among Victorian thinkers, as I have already intimated. The reviewer from *The Times* seems to subscribe to a version of Darwinism that presents the natural world as a place of struggle in which children are unlikely to survive, but for many children's writers and illustrators, Darwinism rather emphasized the kinship of all life. Illustrations in Darwin's own works, particularly *The Expression of the Emotions in Man and Animals* (1872), visually display the relationship between humans and animals; Darwin opposed natural theologians by 'using his animal illustrations as well as his human ones to break down rigid distinctions between the two groups'.<sup>56</sup> His visual and textual emphasis on human and animal kinship is mirrored by children's illustrations from the 1850s to 1870s, which demonstrate an increasing interest in human-animal similarities. Edward Lear's poetry, for instance, depicts such resemblances, as in the limerick "There Was an Old Man who said, "Hush!" with its accompanying illustration (Figure 2). Daniel Brown draws an explicit connection between this depiction of human-animal relations and Darwinism: 'Lear's benign mirroring images of humans meeting and merging with their animal others also resonate with early and mid-Victorian preoccupations with biological developmentalism and the gathering debate over what Huxley describes as "Man's Place in Nature"'.<sup>57</sup> Similarly, for *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* (1865), John Tenniel memorably drew a bedraggled Alice who sits as an equal among a crowd of animals (Figure 3). Jessica Straley argues that this presentation of Alice is an example of her 'species confusion' in light

<sup>56</sup> Jonathan Smith, *Charles Darwin and Victorian Visual Culture* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), p. 190.

<sup>57</sup> Daniel Brown, *The Poetry of Victorian Scientists: Style, Science and Nonsense* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), p. 19.

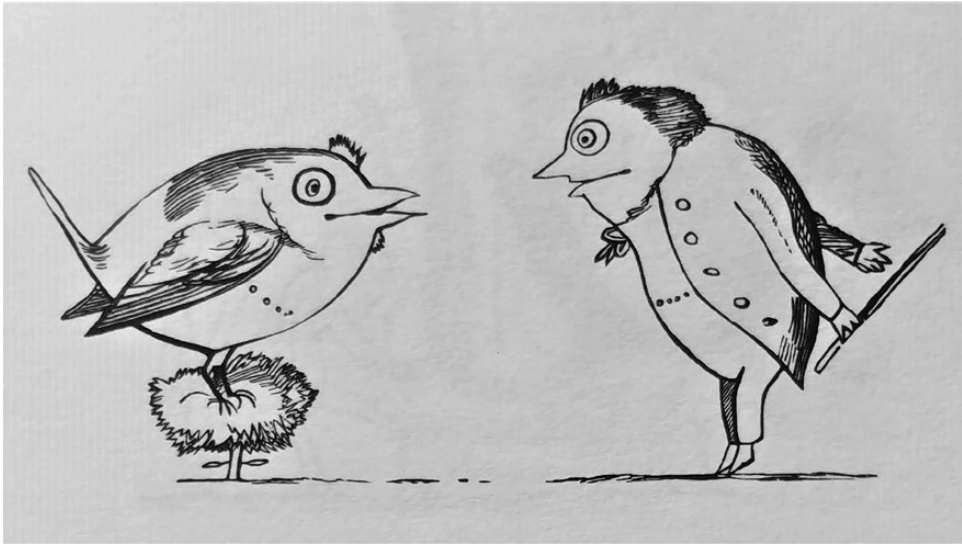


Figure 2: There Was an Old Man who said 'Hush!'. Public Domain. Edward Lear, *The Complete Verse and Other Nonsense*, ed. by Vivien Noakes (London: Penguin, 2001), p. 173.

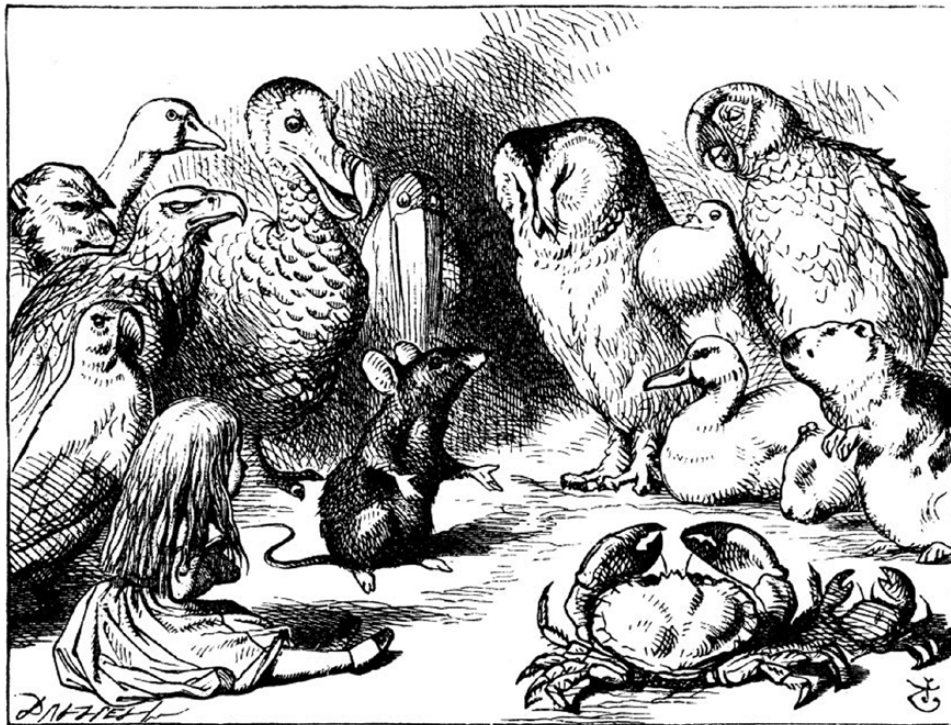


Figure 3: Alice and the animals. Public Domain. Lewis Carroll, *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*, ed. by Hugh Houghton (London: Penguin, 1998), p. 42.

of *Origin's* recent publication.<sup>58</sup> Doyle's illustration of an owl-like princess fits among these examples as a playful re-imagining of man's relation to the animal world. Just as Lang draws upon a textual and oral folkloric tradition, so Doyle invokes an illustrative tradition of resemblances between humans, animals, and fairies, while simultaneously incorporating evolutionary ideas about kinship.

In the mid-Victorian era, miniaturization was also used to re-interpret traditional hierarchy and man's place in nature. According to natural theology, mankind occupied a superior status and was often imagined as more powerful or larger than animals. But in Darwinian evolution, man became a vulnerable being in a large, dangerous world. Bown discusses how Fitzgerald uses miniaturization to address Darwinism: 'The question, "How different are we from animals?" was translated into the question "What size are we?" It is in this context that Fitzgerald's miniature fairy worlds can be seen both to express and to allay anxiety about how large the Victorians, metaphorically speaking, were.'<sup>59</sup> In the frontispiece to *The Princess Nobody*, the children (or perhaps fairies and elves) appear almost insect-like as they clamber up plants and sport amongst flowers. This presentation of the insect-human is repeated throughout the book, and Lang's text continues this theme (pp. 41, 42, 49). At the end of the story, Lang situates a picture of the Prince and Princess on a flower, commenting, 'Lastly, here is a picture of the Prince and Princess at home, sitting on a beautiful Rose, as Fairy's God-child can do if she pleases' (p. 55) (Figure 4). The Prince is wearing a hat with two feathers curling out of the top like antenna, and a butterfly hovers next to the pair, as if reproachful that its place on the flower has been usurped. Doyle's illustrations, and Lang's interpretation of them, put humans on the same scale as animals. The reader is confronted with the question: are the humans and fairies miniature size, or are they in giant land? By engaging with questions of size and resemblance to animals, Doyle's illustrations undermine a view of humanity as a distinct, superior species. In his text, Lang acknowledges that the small size of his protagonists gives them distinctly insect-like qualities. He recapitulates the human-animal nature of Doyle's fairies, passing this evolutionary idea on to the next generation of readers.

Lang further suggests that human kinship with animals is not only intrinsic to Victorian illustrations of Fairyland, but is also fundamental to the folklore of ancient man. In *The Princess Nobody*, he portrays evolutionary ideas as a survival of ancient rationality. The doctrine of survivals was originally presented by E. B. Tylor, who describes these relics of primitive humanity as useful for anthropological research, but in themselves as 'things worn out, worthless, frivolous, or even bad with downright harmful folly.'<sup>60</sup> Lang, conversely, believed that survivals have value for modern humanity. As Jonah Siegel writes, Lang saw a survival as 'something that is carried in the network of culture, that may even be understood to shape culture at a fundamental level; it is a kind of story that is told again and again, a form of belief or practice that has come to seem general, but the historical origins of which are not liable to recuperation.'<sup>61</sup> For Lang, evolution is one such story. He writes in *The Making of Religion* that 'savages may stumble, and have stumbled, on theories not inconsistent with science, but not till recently discovered by science.'<sup>62</sup> In *The Princess Nobody*, he depicts evolutionary themes

<sup>58</sup> Jessica Straley, *Evolution and Imagination in Victorian Children's Literature* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016), p. 94.

<sup>59</sup> Bown, *Fairies in Nineteenth-Century Art*, p. 116.

<sup>60</sup> Edward Burnett Tylor, *Primitive Culture: Researches into the Development of Mythology, Philosophy, Religion, Art, and Custom* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), p. 142.

<sup>61</sup> Jonah Siegel, 'Lang's Survivals', *Romanticism and Victorianism on the Net*, 64 (2013), n. page.

<sup>62</sup> Lang, *The Making of Religion*, p. 321.

that originate in ancient ideas about the natural world. The story is set in humanity's past, 'when Fairies were much more common than they are now' (p. 9), drawing upon an anthropological understanding of fairy stories to suggest that the border between reality and fantasy is less solid than most Victorians assume. Primitive man was just as rational as modern man, but his experience was different. Rather than disparaging a 'savage' understanding of the fantastic, Lang suggests that fairy tales and cultural evolution both draw upon a folkloric understanding of a past world that might seem fantastical to the modern reader. The nineteenth-century formulation of evolution is a more advanced recapitulation of evolutionary ideas grasped by ancient humanity. Likewise, *The Princess Nobody* recapitulates evolutionary ideas already expressed in fairy tales, as well as in Doyle's illustrations.

Lang uses the folkloric convention of talking animals to suggest an evolutionary kinship between humans and animals. As I previously mentioned, Lang at times opposed the philologist Max Müller, who argued that 'Language is our Rubicon, and no brute will dare to cross it.'<sup>63</sup> *The Princess Nobody* demonstrates another divergence from Müller's theories, since in this story, language is no longer the sign of man's superiority, but rather a way of developing



**Figure 4:** The Prince and Princess. Public Domain. Andrew Lang, *The Princess Nobody: A Tale of Fairyland* (London: Longmans, Green, and Co., 1884), p. 55.

<sup>63</sup> F. Max Müller, *Lectures on the Science of Language: Delivered at the Royal Institution of Great Britain in 1861*, 2 vols (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), I, 340.

community between all species. Kaori Nagai observes that, in the Victorian era, ‘Beast fables, considered by many to be the oldest form of literature, were thought to have retained the living voices of animals who “once upon a time” conversed with our animal ancestors.’<sup>64</sup> Lang embraces this view of fairy tales, opening his story with the phrase ‘once upon a time’ (p. 9) and invoking a past world in which human-animal dynamics were different: animals in Fairyland can talk, not just because of their magical abode, but also because they exist in a time when there was less distinction between human and animal.

Even on the human side of the border, the baby princess can speak to the birds and teach them to sing – evidence of her childish, primitive genius (p. 13). Later, when the questing knights journey into Fairyland, ‘[T]hey found all the birds, and all the beasts, quite friendly and kind, and able to talk like other people. This was the way in old times, but now no beasts talk, and no birds, except Parrots only’ (p. 24). In his anthropological writings, Lang argues that animal speech ‘is a notion derived from the old savage condition of the intellect, in which beasts are on a level with, or superior to, humanity.’<sup>65</sup> Fairyland in *The Princess Nobody* is a delightful world of the past where humans and animals are still perceived as equal and interspecies communication is possible. Lang describes animals as ‘other people’, a phrase that denotes kinship. Similarly, in ‘Household Tales’, he states that early mankind believed in ‘human descent from animals’ and in ‘kinship with animals’, even though the scientific basis for this idea would not emerge until the nineteenth century. The fairy-tale trope of talking animals has imaginative and literary power because it is, as Nagai observes, ‘a form of knowledge, containing valuable philosophical insights into the human-animal relationship.’<sup>66</sup> While Doyle’s illustrations bring man down to the level of the animals, Lang’s use of talking beasts elevates animals to the level of man, further emphasizing that humanity is not a superior species. Although this idea is central to nineteenth-century evolutionary discourse, Lang reveals that it has its roots in folklore.

But this communal, evolutionary picture of the world is not devoid of strife. Although the narrator enthuses, ‘Never was there such a happy country; all Birds and Babies, playing together, singing, and as merry as the day was long’, the illustration on the succeeding page casts doubt on this statement (*PN*, pp. 16–17). The illustration shows a baby (Princess Niente in Lang’s story) who has stolen an egg and is being attacked by four birds ([Figure 5](#)). Similarly, on page 28, the illustration portrays several fairies trying to corral rebellious birds and insects. Engen describes Doyle’s fairy beings as ‘creatures of torture’, remarking that Doyle was fascinated by ‘the violence associated with elves and puckish gnomes.’<sup>67</sup> Doyle portrayed animals and human-like fairies violently fighting in his other works as well, most notably ‘Elves Battling with Frogs’ and ‘The Battle of Elves and Crows’, both of which are even more disturbing than the illustrations in *The Princess Nobody*. These depictions of conflict between humans and animals reflect Darwin’s struggle for existence. However, such violence is also characteristic of fairy tales, which are often unstinting in their inclusion of aggression and competition. Doyle’s illustrations invite comparisons between folklore and evolution through

<sup>64</sup> Kaori Nagai, *Imperial Beast Fables: Animals, Cosmopolitanism, and the British Empire* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2020) p. 12.

<sup>65</sup> Andrew Lang, ‘Perrault’s Popular Tales’, in *The Edinburgh Critical Edition of the Selected Writings of Andrew Lang*, ed. by Andrew Teverson, Alexandra Warwick, and Leigh Wilson (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2015), pp. 131–51 (p. 142).

<sup>66</sup> Nagai, *Imperial Beast Fables*, p. 67.

<sup>67</sup> Engen, *Richard Doyle*, pp. 156, 142.



their portrayal of conflict, although perhaps not as graphically in *The Princess Nobody* as in other examples of his work.

However, these depictions of strife are confined to the illustrations; in the text, Lang is more interested in showing how mutual aid can offset the negative effects of the struggle for existence. For instance, Prince Comical saves a Daddy Long Legs from three boys who are pulling its leg: “Then the Daddy Long Legs sat up, and said in a weak voice, “You have been very kind to me; what can I do for *you*?”” (p. 25). This interaction institutes a reciprocal economy of kindness in which mutual aid allows both parties to benefit. Such instances of mutual aid and morality are common even among the oldest fairy tales, as Lang suggests in his essay ‘Perrault’s Popular Tales.’<sup>68</sup> But Lang is also engaging in a debate about whether natural selection works primarily through strife or through mutual aid. This debate, which had been ongoing since the publication of *Origin*, was one that Darwin felt compelled to address in *The Descent of Man* (1872). *Origin* had emphasized that members of a species compete for resources, but in *Descent*, Darwin acknowledges:

There can be no doubt that a tribe including many members who, from possessing in a high degree the spirit of patriotism, fidelity, obedience, courage, and sympathy, were always ready to give aid to each other and to sacrifice themselves for the common good, would be victorious over most other tribes; and this would be natural selection.<sup>69</sup>

Although Doyle’s illustrations depict nature similarly to *Origin*, Lang’s story in *The Princess Nobody* (coming 13 years after *Descent*), portrays evolution in a more harmonious light. In this



**Figure 5:** The attacked Princess. Public Domain. Andrew Lang, *The Princess Nobody: A Tale of Fairyland* (London: Longmans, Green, and Co., 1884), p. 17.

<sup>68</sup> Lang, ‘Perrault’s Popular Tales,’ pp. 141–49.

<sup>69</sup> Charles Darwin, *The Descent of Man, and Selection in Relation to Sex*, ed. by John Tyler Bonner and Robert M. May (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1981), p. 166.

case, Lang does not recapitulate Doyle but instead presents an alternative version of fairy tale tropes, thereby establishing his own understanding of evolution as a process that requires mutual aid rather than struggle. This reversion to older sources demonstrates how evolutionary ideas are rooted in past versions of the theory but are also reinterpreted by each storyteller.

An uncomfortable undertone of extinction punctuates the final page of *The Princess Nobody*, offering one more example of how fairy tales depict evolutionary ideas. Although the Prince and Princess live happily ever after, the story concludes with a sentence about the Black Beetle who helped Prince Comical in his quest: '[H]e was appointed to a place about the Court, but he never married, he had no children, and there are no *other* Black Beetles, consequently, in the country where the Prince and Princess became King and Queen' (p. 55). Laurence Talairach-Vielmas comments:

Victorian fairies and fairy tales were strongly connected to the theory of evolution, and the disappearance of fairies at the end of the nineteenth century – or the nostalgia which fairies conjured up at the turn of the century – increasingly shaped fairies and fairy tales as extinct creatures.<sup>70</sup>

As I have argued, Lang presents the world of *The Princess Nobody* as a past world, and his writing in general sees fairy tales as part of the past of childhood and the human race. He ends *The Princess Nobody* with a poem that describes the fairy world as '*Au temps jadis*, as Perrault says, / In half-forgotten Fairy days' (p. 56, lines 1–2). Lang embraces the traditional image of the fairy tale as taking place '*au temps jadis*' – a long time ago. But intriguingly, it is a common black beetle that faces extinction, a reminder that extinction can make any creature – whether dinosaur, fairy, or beetle – a mythical being of the past. By writing a story in which ancient folkloric tropes depict evolutionary themes like human kinship with animals, mutual aid, and extinction, Lang suggests that fairy tales offer time-tested ways of thinking about modern scientific discoveries. Furthermore, he demonstrates the closeness between evolutionary theory and fairy tales, implying that the theory originates in folkloric beliefs about humanity. As a textual recapitulation, *The Princess Nobody* illustrates the ancient historiography of evolutionary ideas and demonstrates how past beliefs evolve into modern science.

#### 4. THE FAIRY TALE OF EVOLUTION

Although Lang claimed to dislike modern allusions in fairy tales, he was eager to show how fairy tales and folklore anticipate nineteenth-century evolutionary ideas. His own fairy story discusses man's relationship with animals, humanity's origins, and mutual aid, using ancient fairy-tale themes to demonstrate that old ways of thinking may help people grapple with the difficult questions raised by evolutionary theory in the Victorian era. Lang reminds readers that just as Charles Darwin cannot claim priority over Higgins (or Erasmus Darwin), neither can he claim priority over fairy tales, which have always offered profound reflections on human history and its origins. Man's kinship with the beasts, for instance, is as much a belief of primitive humanity as a Darwinian idea. Lang suggests that fairy tales may tell readers as much about their origins and customs as scientific texts, just as literary forms such as poetry and satire (whether Erasmus Darwin's or Higgins') might include scientific insights as valuable

<sup>70</sup> Laurence Talairach-Vielmas, *Fairy Tales, Natural History and Victorian Culture* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014), p. 6.

as those found in Spencer's writings. In *The Princess Nobody*, Lang's textual recapitulation of ancient fairy tales and Doyle's illustrations reflects the ways in which evolutionary ideas have developed over generations, building up a folklore of evolution. By aligning evolutionary theory with folklore, Lang undermines the division between specialist and non-specialist understandings of evolution, granting evolutionary theory a central and ancient place among humanity's beliefs.

*The Princess Nobody* was received with approval by many reviewers, although a few seemed uneasy about the rise of the fairy-tale genre. A reviewer in the *Illustrated London News* expresses a slight disdain for fantastical children's books. He discusses with obvious approval *The Autocrat of the Nursery* by L. T. Meade, which recounts the nursery antics of three-year-old 'Tarlie'. This realistic book 'is a story to make children wish and try to be good.'<sup>71</sup> The reviewer then comments:

Doctor Johnson, who did not know much about it, wise man as he was, said that babies do not like stories about babies, and that they would rather be entertained with tales of giants, fairies, goblins, and fierce wild beasts. Well, there are children who like these too; and the Christmas publishers have got plenty of books ready for them, full of supernatural as well as natural marvels.<sup>72</sup>

This quotation suggests mild disbelief at the claim that children prefer fantastical stories, and the reviewer moves on almost reluctantly to a discussion of *The Princess Nobody* and the swathe of other fanciful literature. He fails to realize that *The Princess Nobody* itself is a story 'about babies' and 'natural marvels' – a story about children and the childhood of the human species as much as about fairies and elves. Despite its whimsical illustrations and charming plot, *The Princess Nobody* might – as Lang expresses it – 'teach the true lessons of our wayfaring in a world of perplexities and obstructions', just as its fairy tale predecessors do.<sup>73</sup> Lang closes 'Higgins, the Inventor of Evolution' with the statement, 'Of course, I do not accuse Mr. Spencer of pilfering from Higgins, whom he probably never read. Great wits jump, that is all.'<sup>74</sup> To Lang's mind, 'pilfering' is an unavoidable aspect of evolutionary theorizing because evolution is part of the human story, an idea that might arise in the mind of any individual, manifesting as a fairy tale, a poem, or a scientific text. Consequently, 'great wits' might be found even among those who are not scientific thinkers, such as the storytellers of early mankind, or even the ingenious inhabitants of the nursery.

#### DISCLOSURE STATEMENT

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

<sup>71</sup> 'Children's Christmas Books', *Illustrated London News*, 20 December 1884, p. 602, in *Gale Primary Sources* [accessed 28 August 2022].

<sup>72</sup> 'Children's Christmas Books', p. 602.

<sup>73</sup> Lang, 'Modern Fairy Tales', p. 714.

<sup>74</sup> Lang, 'Higgins', p. 214.