The distinctive Victorian pantomime emerged in the middle of the nineteenth century. Its predecessor, the Regency pantomime, the clown-centred Harlequinade, reached its apogee during the pre-eminence of Joseph Grimaldi (1806–1837). The Regency pantomime had a short one or two scene ‘opening’ with a plot derived from fairy story, nursery rhyme, myth and legend and the much longer Harlequinade in which the characters of the opening were transformed into the characters of the commedia dell’arte – Harlequin, Columbine and Pantaloon – and engaged in a knockabout sequence of song, dance and acrobatics. The largely dialogue-less form of the Regency pantomime was dictated by the 1737 Licensing Act which gave a monopoly of the spoken word on stage to the patent theatres, Drury Lane and Covent Garden.

However the passing of the Theatre Regulation Act of 1843 signalled a major shift in the nature of the genre. The act abolished the patent theatres’ monopoly of the spoken word and opened up the use of dialogue to all theatres. This had a direct effect on the ‘opening’ which now got longer and longer, revelling in the linguistic freedom allowed by rhyming couplets, the ability to pun and the chance to comment on current events. At the same time another popular form was grafted onto the pantomime. This was the extravaganza, which burlesqued popular legends and folk tales and combined this with glittering spectacle. The form, first seen in Olympic Revels (1831), was largely the work of J. R. Planché (1796–1880). The previous dominance of Harlequin and Columbine was challenged by the rise of the principal boy and the dame as the characteristic figures of the pantomime. Various explanations have been advanced for this development. The most plausible is that the principal boy, a female performer in male dress, appeared following the success of Madame Vestris in the breeches roles in the Olympic and

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Lyceum extravaganzas, and that the dame, a man in drag, appeared in the wake of the recruitment of music hall performers into pantomime casts. As the opening lengthened, so the Harlequinade shrunk. By the 1890s the opening ran to several hours with the Harlequinade reduced to a couple of scenes. The attractions of the pantomime were by then spectacle, lavish ballet sequences, troupes of child performers, music hall favourites and high quality scene painting.

The transformation in the nature of the pantomime makes it as a genre a manifestation of the phenomenon described by Diane Purkiss: ‘It is in Victorian England that fairyland … undergoes a popular explosion. Fairies, elves, gnomes and small winged things of every kind multiply into swarms and infest writing and art and the minds of men and women.’¹ In France and Germany the fairy tale became a new art form and the expression of the new Romantic sensibility, which included a fascination with the supernatural. In England the fairy tale, discouraged by the forces of Puritanism, was revived as part of the reaction against the regimentation, depersonalization and materialism associated with the Industrial Revolution and the Factory System. New fairy tales were written in the 1840s and 1850s in particular in order to critique the failings of the urban and industrial world of the nineteenth century.²

Collections of fairy tales began to appear in English. In 1823 and 1826 there appeared an English translation by Edgar Taylor of Grimms’ fairy tales, German Popular Stories, illustrated by Cruikshank. It has been called ‘the most important publication to stimulate an awakened interest in fairy tales by children and adults’.³ In 1827 Carlyle published a selection of German fairy tales in two volumes, German Romances. In 1840 there was a new translation by Edwin Lane of tales from the Arabian Nights. In 1846 the first translation of Hans Christian Andersen’s fairy tales appeared. In addition new fairy stories were being written by noted writers in England: among them Dickens, Carlyle, Thackeray, Hood and Ruskin.

Where almost all the fairy tales of the 1840s and 1850s were allegorical critiques of modern industrial capitalism, the genre diverged from 1860 onwards as the majority of fairy story writers (e.g. Mrs Craik, Andrew Lang and E. Nesbit) sought to reconcile their readers to the status quo while a minority questioned the existing social structure and values (Lewis Carroll, George MacDonald, Oscar Wilde). At the same time fairies were desexualized and linked with the idea of childhood innocence. Dickens wrote an essay for Household Words (1 October 1853) on the ethical value of fairy stories, arguing that they taught