Robins were one of the themes chosen by the fairy painter John Anster Christian Fitzgerald (1819?–1906) for a series of works on Cock Robin, including *The Captive Robin* (c.1864), *Who Killed Cock Robin?*, *Cock Robin Defending his Nest* and *Fairies Sleeping in a Bird’s Nest*. In *Who Killed Cock Robin?*, the death of the robin illustrates how Fitzgerald’s paintings, often dark and permeated by a dream-like or nightmarish atmosphere suggestive of his familiarity with drugs, connect the world of fairies not only with the natural world but also with that of spirits and ghosts. Of course, the series reproduces natural ecosystems and the deaths of animals depict the struggle for life in the natural world. As Nicola Bown suggests, Fitzgerald’s *Who Killed Cock Robin?* may have been influenced by Victorian taxidermic displays, in particular Walter Potter’s *The Death of Cock Robin* (1861) which was widely advertised.¹ As both decorative art and scientific arrangement, aimed at helping naturalists or amateurs wishing to learn about natural history, taxidermic displays represented ecosystems safely encased in glass. But the fad for anthropomorphic taxidermy also drew attention to the links between humans and animals and anxieties related to humans’ place in the natural world.

Both Fitzgerald’s paintings and Potter’s taxidermic display underscore, moreover, the powerful connections between robins and death. Robins were, indeed, believed to cover up or bury the bodies of people who died in the woods,² a belief on which Mary Louisa Molesworth capitalizes in one of her fairy tales. In ‘Ask the Robin’, Molesworth plays upon identical themes to connect birds both to the world of fairies and to the realm of death. The fairy tale relates the story of...
two sisters, one of whom (Linde) is visited in her dream by a strange woman telling her to go into the enchanted forest, dig up a robin which is buried but not dead (lying entranced, as in sensational cases of live burial and catalepsy) and resuscitate the bird. The tale’s play on the tension between life and death and the life-in-death condition of the robin may recall as well taxidermic displays. Moreover, the narrative stresses humans’ impact on natural ecosystems, presenting both animals and fairies as victims of humans’ disrespect for nature and nature’s creatures. As the legend has it, the fairies once haunted the forest, until one day a cruel man killed a robin. The act of digging up the bird by the pure and innocent maiden will put an end to a spell on the forest which led to the disappearance of the fairies. Because it induced the vanishing of both fairies and birds, the murder points to the closeness of fairies to the natural world. The lesson underlying Molesworth’s fairy tale enhances the educational role that children’s fiction played at the time, teaching children how to protect nature. Indeed, while controlling nature was at the heart of Victorian preoccupations, more and more women attempted to raise children’s interest in and concern for ‘nonhuman nature’, underlining the need for the conservation and the preservation of species threatened by industrial societies in both popular science works and fiction. In addition, Molesworth’s fairy tale, just like Fitzgerald’s ‘Cock Robin’ series, aligns nature and human nature, capitalizing on the association of fairies with the world of dreams and the unconscious. As we shall see, Mrs Molesworth’s tales often foreground women’s relationship with nature the better to valorize feminine intellectual faculties. ‘Ask the Robin’ highlights women’s high sensitivity and preternatural powers, as illustrated by Linde’s premonitory dream, which stem from women’s closeness with nature and nature’s inhabitants, be they fairies or birds. The maiden’s ‘fairy perceptions’ and her association with the dead are strongly reminiscent of occult experiments, and Molesworth’s narrative, though aimed at children, seems to contain a latent discourse related to women’s mental powers that reaches beyond the fairy tale. Similarly, in *Christmas-Tree Land* (1884), women’s power to communicate with nature enables them not only to teach children how to protect the natural world and become well versed in natural history but also to invent fairy stories – a form of knowledge buried in individuals’ minds and which the civilizing process has repressed.