Fairy Lights: Light and a Changing Paradigm of Love at the End of the Nineteenth Century

Joanna Beaufoy

In an essay in *Second Star to the Right: Peter Pan in the Popular Imagination*, Murray Pomerance argues that the character Tinker Bell in the 1904 play *Peter Pan* represented *la fée électricité* – the electricity fairy.[1] 'In Tinker Bell', Pomerance writes, 'Barrie was embodying the idea and myth of "la fée électricité", an enchanter but also a servant'.[2] A ubiquitous figure of the 1900 Paris World Fair, the *fée électricité* was the winged goddess who crowned the fair's Palais de l'Électricité, shown in Figure 9.1 in an illustration from the newspaper *Le Petit Journal*.[3] She stands above the year '1900', engraved in stone, suggesting electricity as the deity of the new century. Placed at the closest point to the sun, she emits rays of light that evoke depictions of Louis XIV, the 'Sun King', above fountains in the courtyard that recall those of Versailles.

Assimilated into the popular imagination of the Belle époque and its associated imagery of femininity in the art nouveau mode, she remains a recognisable icon of the early twentieth century. At the 1937 World Fair, a gargantuan fresco was commissioned by La Compagnie parisienne de distribution de l'électricité, a private utilities company, entitled *La Fée électricité*. On display today at the Musée d'art moderne de Paris, it measures over 600 square metres and shows the electricity fairy bringing light and energy to everything she touches. Because of its scale and how it is painted on a curved wall, it is difficult to reproduce in print, so Figure 9.2 shows a lithograph print made subsequently of a detail of the fresco. In this small section – only a fragment of the whole piece – the goddess Iris enters in naked flight from the right, illuminating part of the string section of an orchestra; flying over deserts and the pyramids of Egypt; over towards skyscrapers and domes, with farmland in the distance, still in shadow, mirroring the coming of the dawn. By assimilating the *fée électricité* with the classical imagery of the messenger goddess of rainbows, the electricity company sought to show the *fée électricité* as the sun of the new century, bringing light and colour to the world.

1 Murray Pomerance, 'Tinker Bell, the Fairy of Electricity', in Alison B. Kavey and Lester D. Friedman, eds., *Second Star to the Right* (Ithaca: Rutgers University Press, 2009), 13.

2 Pomerance, 'Tinker Bell, the Fairy of Electricity', 17.

3 A newspaper article from May 1900 described this statue as 'la fée de l'électricité', but *l'électricité* soon lost its definite article and she became *la fée électricité*, showing the contraction of the two images into one. (Maurice Normand, 'A travers l'exposition', *L'Illustration* 2987 (26 May 1900), 335. With thanks to Anne O'Neil-Henry for this reference.)

Figure 9.1. Henri Meyer, A poster offered as a supplement to *Le Petit Journal*, showing the Palais de l'Électricité at the 1900 Paris World Fair, reproduced with permission from Le Petit Palais, Musée des Beaux-arts de la Ville de Paris.

Much has been written about the use of the eroticised female form to conjure an aura around commodities, invoking erotic power to stand for industrial and commercial power, and *la fée électricité* is in many ways emblematic of this practice. The question of the role played by this fairy and other fairies of light in the history of love as part of social practices has, on the other hand, been neglected. The commodified fairy we see in Dufy's commission by the electricity company and, later, in Disney's version of Tinker Bell, has a more complex history in the nineteenth century, which this essay investigates as part of a paradigm shift in the place of love in society. I will argue that the popularity of 'fairy light' as an aesthetic of popular entertainment in the late nineteenth century had a philosophical parallel in the changing role of love towards children. Secondly, I will examine the annexation of the figure of the fairy from the theatre stage to the electricity industry towards the turn of the century to look at social shifts, asking what they suggest about changing expressions of love.

According to Simon May in his book *Love: A New Understanding of an Ancient Emotion*, it was in this same period, from the 1870s onwards, that the love of children began to replace erotic love, which in turn had replaced the love of God,

Figure 9.2. Atelier Sorlier-Mourlot under the direction of Raoul Dufy, Lithograph print made in 1952 reproducing a detail of Dufy's 600 m^2 fresco *La Fee Électricité* (1937), Centre Pompidou, MNAM-CCI / Dist. RMN-GP / Georges Meguerditchian.

as the highest possible form of love.[4] Indications May gives that such a paradigm shift was happening include the idea that 'an idiom of "becoming"' began to be privileged 'over "being"',[5] and in the first part of this essay, I will argue for the role

4 Simon May, *Love: A New Understanding of an Ancient Emotion* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019). May identifies three shifts in love occurring in the nineteenth century: first, the flowering of high romantic love around 1800, based on a divine model of love of God, where sex is transfigured into spiritual intimacy. Second, erotic love taking over from the love of God around 1830, which was intrinsically unconditional: the sense that lovers could be star-crossed or doomed, the power of erotic attraction fusing them and defining their destiny. Thirdly, around 1870, love for one's children becoming the highest possible form of love, replacing the erotic lover.

5 May, *Love: A New Understanding*, 230.

played by fairy lights in representing this ontological shift. Another indication May gives is discussed in the second part: that we began to wage a 'war on risk'.[6] 'This epochal change', May writes, 'which dawns, with remarkable suddenness, between the mid- to late nineteenth centuries, when, as the sociologist Viviana Zelizer has shown, children under fourteen went from being objects of "utility" to objects of "sentiment"'.[7] I consider May's 'war on risk' in light of the electricity fairy's incarnation as Tinker Bell in *Peter Pan*. In the final part, I explore the electricity fairy's role in a shift towards a greater valuing of domesticity, what May refers to as an increased 'affirmation of the everyday',[8] in his argument that the love of the child became late-modernity's archetypal model of love.

Dance, surge and flash: The aesthetics of 'becoming' over 'being'

The place of the magical within late nineteenth-century modernity as first seems paradoxical: how could the great accumulation and propagation of scientific knowledge during this period be coupled with a desire to confuse and confound and, most importantly, a desire to be confused and confounded? A cursory examination of popular advertising material in late nineteenth-century Paris reveals the audience's desire to *not* understand how a magic trick is performed, how a set is lit, how an orb of light appears on the wall before them. One Belle époque poster seems full of contradictions, as it implores spectators to come and see, 'Nouveaux tours de physique amusante et de secrets utiles' [New tricks of amusing physics and useful secrets].[9] The transformation of magical crafts that came with inventions of complex optical instruments, allowing, by the end of the eighteenth century, convincing optical illusions, began the trajectory that created modern cinema. Technology was becoming the magic of the modern age, and the incarnation of electricity as fairy shows how readily it was depicted as magic: something that could transform one thing into another. It could transform darkness into light and vice versa, but also conjure one atmosphere, then another, instantaneously.

Simon May's argument that a paradigm shift in the way we love in the late nineteenth century reflects this dynamic in his suggestion that the new dominant paradigm of love of children had its own time form:

6 May, *Love: A New Understanding*, 205.
7 May, *Love: A New Understanding*, 199.
8 May, *Love: A New Understanding*, 218.
9 ed. Salanon, René and Samson, Claude, *Cent ans d'affiches: 'La Belle époque'* (Paris: UCAD, 1964), 82.

> Its time, unlike the way we experience climactic moments in romantic love, doesn't 'stand still' but is in perpetual motion. It chimes with modernity's veneration of the new: our reverence for the instant when a life, an act, a thought that has never existed before comes into being; our reverence for possibility, for the radical event, for the open horizon, for the contemporary.[10]

The popularity of fairy narratives – part of the wider context of the vogue for spiritualism – and the development of the electricity fairy in the same period – resonates with May's observation. His thesis that the love of the child becomes the supreme form of love at a time when an idiom of 'becoming' begins to be favoured over 'being' invites contextualisation within the history of technology.[11]

Electric lighting was a new technology. The end of the nineteenth century was a luminous crossroads, when antiquated and modern lighting were used simultaneously. Although first demonstrated in the 1850s in the form of arc lights, the lightbulb was not patented until 1880 by Edison followed by Swan (although Swan appears to have demonstrated his model earlier). At the turn of the twentieth century, most homes in European cities were still lit with gas, oil and candles, with some having electricity installed in reception rooms as a luxury; it was not yet common in domestic sleeping quarters. To appreciate how magical it seemed to contemporaries, we can consider how electricity was steeped in vitalist ideas from the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries that saw electric activity in bodies as coming from the soul. The idea of encasing this magic in glass and putting it in your drawing room would have been highly novel and at first fantastical, an example of 'a radical event' that May says contemporaries were increasingly yearning for. In her passage in *Orlando*, evoking the feelings of looking out onto a new century, Virginia Woolf captures the magic of the 'switch', how it created a new relationship between light and time: 'Look at the lights in the houses! At a touch, the whole room was lit; hundreds of rooms were lit […] At a touch, the whole room was bright. And the sky was bright all night long; and the pavements were bright; everything was bright'.[12]

A look into the aesthetics of lighting in the period May is referencing reveals characteristics that correlate with this idea of a greater ideal of privileging the 'becoming' over the 'being'. While the Modernists have given us an image of electricity as the static, glaring electric lamp post, or the cold and still bar lighting of a Hopper painting, electric light in its earliest uses (ca. 1878–90) was on the contrary associated with movement, vitality and play. This fairy of the 1880s was

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10 May, *Love: A New Understanding*, 217.
11 May, *Love: A New Understanding*, 230.
12 Virginia Woolf, *Orlando* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015).

a different fairy to the one who would go on to be captured by the electricity industry in the form of the *fée électricité*. One of the key reasons Edison became the most successful manufacturer of electric bulbs was that his competitors did not foresee their mass use outside of popular spectacle.[13] The fact that electric Christmas tree lights were tested for the first time in a New York apartment less than two years after Edison and Swan first exhibited their light bulbs demonstrates how electric light was seen foremost as a spectacular technology in the early 1880s. Movement, vitality and play explain electric light's embodiment as a fairy, an ontological representation of 'becoming'.

The ability to create electric fairy lights was a technological development that made it possible to create lighting effects that were not previously technically or safely feasible on stage. In advance of electric bulbs being used on stage for the first time in theatre history for *Patience* at the Savoy theatre on 28 December 1881, *The Daily News* reported that 'the little rows of lamps [were] in close a line as the hammers of a pianoforte'.[14] A production of Gilbert and Sullivan's *Iolanthe* had been running since the 1882 season opening, but on 15 February 1883 there was a novelty: the fairies filling the stage were now wearing lightbulb costumes with tiny bulbs mounted on their headdresses.[15] To sense the aesthetics of 'becoming' in relation to electric light and love, it is important to consider the technical history of these lights, known in British English as 'fairy lights', alongside the metaphor of the fairy.

'Fairy lights' are multiple, small lights in a row, twinkling lights which appear magical, but the uncanny sense of movement is due to an optical illusion: each individual light is too small for the eye to process; seen together, the miniature lights are interpreted by the eye as twinkling. The term 'fairy lights' was not coined by their use with electricity, as many online sources claim; the term appears in the British Newspaper Archive as early as 1820 referring to candles placed close together. The idea of moving, minuscule lights can be traced to *feux follets* (from *fou*, *folle* meaning mad): misleading lights in bogs that led travellers to their deaths, confounding a traveller in darkness (scientifically speaking, a form of bioluminescence). There is therefore a seductive and elusive semantics of fairy lights, beyond the 'magical' or 'pretty' atmosphere rendered, where their movement provides a sense of an unknown ending. Furthermore, folklore

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13 Bähr, Johannes, and Patricia C. Sutcliffe. 'To Sustain the Position Achieved', *Werner von Siemens: 1816–1892*, 1st ed. (Verlag C.H.Beck, 2017), 355–56.

14 *The Daily News*, 28 December 1881, 2.

15 Seeley, Paul, *The first Savoy operas* (Routledge, 2018), 84. Many sources date the lightbulb costumes to 1882, mistakenly taking the date when the production opened. Seeley's book informs us that the lightbulb costumes were a later addition.

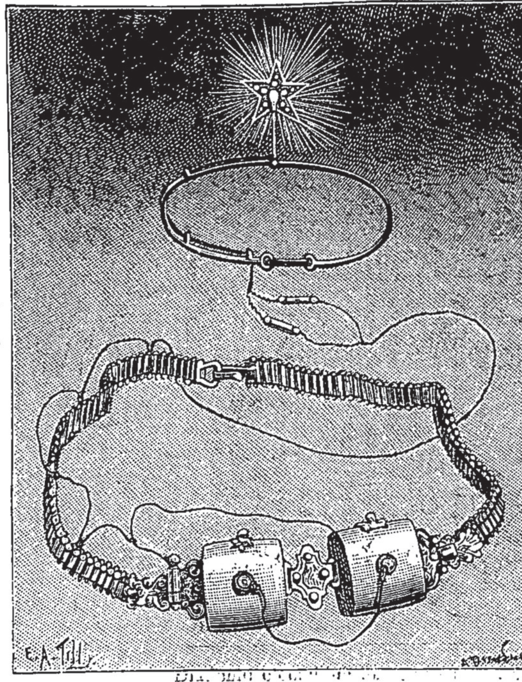
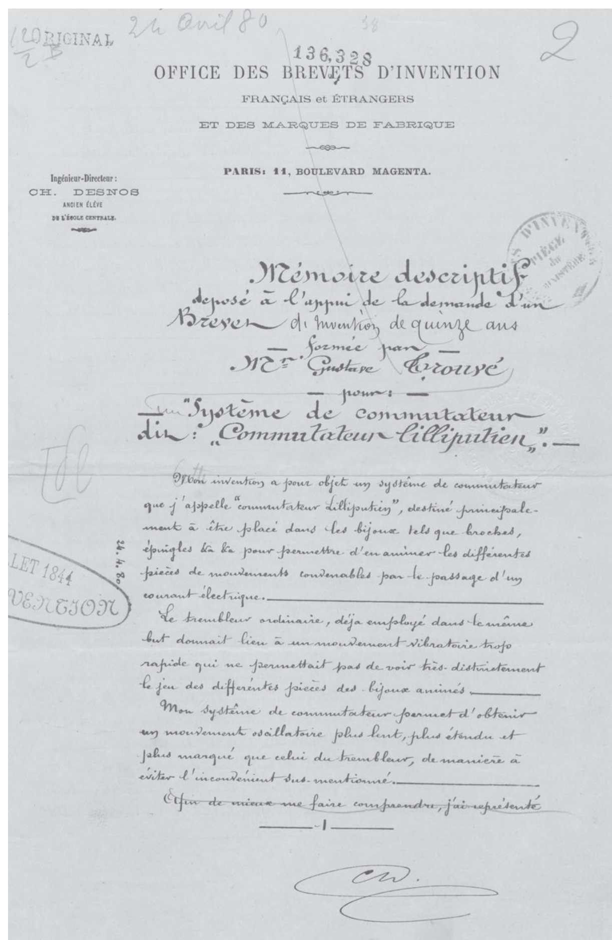


Figure 9.3. Electric diadem and belt, with two battery elements, used in the Paris Opera's ballet *La Farandole* (Edouard Hospitalier: *L'Électricité dans la Maison* (Gallica, 1885), 261). Source: gallica.bnf.fr / Bibliothèque nationale de France.

explanations of *feux follets* (*will-o'-the-wisp*, in English) tell that these lights are the souls of children who died before they could be baptised, carrying a sense of entrapment in perpetual 'becoming'.

Developments in battery technology were also crucial to achieving an aesthetic of becoming. The fairy dancers in *Iolanthe* wore miniature battery packs hidden in their costumes, resembling those patented by the French inventor of 'electric jewellery', Gustave Trouvé during the 1870s.[16] Gustave Trouvé's descriptions in his various patent applications during the 1870s and 1880s tell part of the story of how it became possible to articulate new moods like surges

[16] Indeed, Arthur Sullivan travelled to Paris one month before these electric costumes were added to the theatre's production of the fairy opera, suggesting the idea may have come from the electric jewellery on display in the windows of Trouvé's shop on 14, rue Vivienne. Electric jewellery by Scrivanow, a rival of Trouvé, was used at the Paris ballet's production of *La Farandole*, later in 1883 (Otto, Ulf. 'Industrial Ballets'. In: *The Theater of Electricity* (Stuttgart: Palgrave Macmillan, 2023), 193–221.



ORIGINAL 24 Avril 80

136,328

OFFICE DES BREVETS D'INVENTION

FRANÇAIS et ÉTRANGERS

ET DES MARQUES DE FABRIQUE

PARIS: 11, BOULEVARD MAGENTA.

Ingénieur-Directeur :
CH. DESNOS
ANCIEN ÉLÈVE
DE L'ÉCOLE CENTRALE.

Mémoire descriptif
déposé à l'appui de la demande d'un
Brevet d'invention de quinze ans
— formée par —
Mr. Gustave Trouvé
— pour : —
"Système de commutateur
dit : „Commutateur lilliputien". —

Mon invention a pour objet un système de commutateur que j'appelle "commutateur lilliputien", destiné principalement à être placé dans les bijoux tels que broches, épingles &a &a pour permettre d'en animer les différentes pièces de mouvements convenables par le passage d'un courant électrique.

Le trembleur ordinaire, déjà employé dans le même but donnait lieu à un mouvement vibratoire trop rapide qui ne permettait pas de voir très distinctement le jeu des différentes pièces des bijoux animés.

Mon système de commutateur permet d'obtenir un mouvement oscillatoire plus lent, plus étendu et plus marqué que celui du trembleur, de manière à éviter l'inconvénient sus-mentionné.

Afin de mieux me faire comprendre, j'ai représenté

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Figure 9.4. Gustave Trouvé, Patent number 136328: 'lilliputian switch', a technology identical or similar to that used in the 15 February 1883 performance of Gilbert and Sullivan's *Iolanthe* at the Savoy Theatre in London. Reproduced with permission from L'Institut National de la Propriété Industrielle, France.

of light, flashes and sudden illumination thanks to the new technologies of fairy lights. His 'lilliputian switch', patented in 1880, is designed to 'make it possible to obtain an oscillatory movement that is slower, more spread out, and more pronounced'.[17]

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[17] Gustave Trouvé, 'Système de commutateur dit commutateur lilliputien', Patent number 136328, 24 April 1880, French National Archives.

A later version of the concept that combined the inventions of Swan, Edison and Trouvé is shown on the poster for *Electric dancers* (ca 1900). The poster reads: 'Alone and Unique / Waltzing and Cascading / with / 1200 Electric Lamps' (my translation). In these costumes, tiny light bulbs fan out from the heart of the male dancer, whose costume bears the shapes of a Renaissance courtier but where the motifs are replaced by lightbulbs. Like the electricity fairies in the other images before, the female dancer is in flight, her foot lightly resting on the thigh of her partner, her gaze far away, looking perhaps to a future time rather than to the now: a narrative of 'becoming' over 'being'.

Before the 1880s, mentions of *électricité* or *électrique* relating to fairies in French texts place her in various contexts, especially medicine and industry, but not

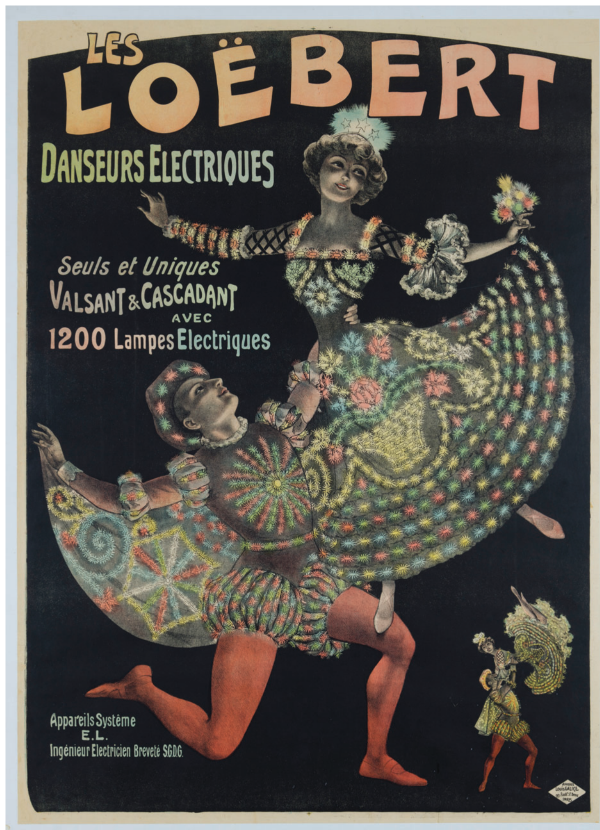

Figure 9.5. Anon., c/o Affiches Louis Galice, 99 rue du Faubourg St Denis, Les Loëbert, *Danseurs Electriques* (ca 1900), Reproduced with permission from Philippe Lortscher / Musée Electropolis, France.

necessarily in the context of lighting. From the 1880s onwards, however, analysis of linguistic trends shows that she is associated increasingly and quickly with electric lighting primarily. It was therefore because of this theatrical production in London, I argue, that the figure of the fairy began to be associated indissociably with electricity and spread internationally, leading to the *fée électricité* in France that would eventually inspire the Dufy mural shown in Figure 9.2. The technical innovations of bulbs and lilliputian batteries enabled the theatrical fairy worlds that were popular among all ages, a vogue for magic and illusion that reflects society's renewed love and interest in childhood.

The history of the emotions and the history of lighting technologies seem, at first glance, to be strange bedfellows. When we notice, however, how developing lighting technologies made it possible to use light to describe and provoke emotions in terms of dancing movement, surges and sudden flashes, it emerges that these technologies are not only representational tools but also in themselves emotional experiences: falling in love, for example, is often described in terms of light. With respect to parental love, May is perceptive that 'becoming' trumps 'being': the knowledge of the future self which the parent helps to create makes it possible to survive or thrive beyond the often arduous 'being'. The child represents the future, and it seems to fit that a greater focus on the love of children would correlate with this period of the industrial revolution.

However, May appears to argue that a greater interest in 'everyday' loving participated in the shift to the child over the romantic lover as being the dominant paradigm of love: 'As every exhausted parent knows, love for your child, unlike romantic love, is not manifested or proved by exciting daily life – let alone by yearning to transcend the limits of space, time, and individuality'.[18] On the contrary, I would argue that the popularity of fairy plays and childlike forms of entertainment in this period suggest an ever greater appetite to transcend these limits, precisely because of the ambivalent nature of parental love. The theatre with its hidden functionalities and its darkened wings, lit by electric light, provides an aesthetic parallel with experiences of parental love: the everyday experience of caring for children is largely drudgery, a laborious backdrop illuminated with loving moments and surges of charm. One could argue that it is only by transcending the limits of time: by collecting love into moments of passion, rather than considering the long hours of labour, that the love of the child becomes possible. Taking a child to a fairy play, engaging in their ephemeral imaginative play that is mostly lost in adulthood, are moments of earthbound twinkling that make it easier to pick out bits of soggy bread from a woollen jumper. Love

[18] May, *Love: A New Understanding*, 218.

of the child is a kind of magical servitude, reflected by the domestication of *la fée électricité* towards 1900.

The electricity fairy's protective magic in a 'war on risk'

At a performance of Offenbach's *Les Contes d'Hoffmann* on 8 December 1881 at the Ringtheater in Vienna, between 384 and 620 theatregoers – the exact number is unknown, and accounts vary – were killed: burnt alive or crushed in panicked crowds as they tried to flee a fire that engulfed the auditorium in minutes, sparked by the stage gas lighting. These gas disasters were frequent tragedies in theatres all over Europe. In *Les Nouvelles conquêtes de la science: l'électricité* [New conquests of science: electricity] (1884), Louis Figuier conveys the horror:

> dans cinq minutes, la fumée remplit tout, et commence à asphyxier les spectateurs. Alors, une personne malavisée a l'idée de fermer le compteur à gaz; et voilà, comme à Nice, la salle subitement plongée dans une obscurité totale. […] Au milieu de l'obscurité, les spectateurs cherchent à gagner les issues; mais ils ne les trouvent pas, et s'écrasent, s'étouffent, aux portes des couloirs.[19]

> [within five minutes, smoke is everywhere, and begins to suffocate the theatre-goers; next, an ill-advised person has the idea of shutting off the gas; and then, just like in Nice, the auditorium is suddenly plunged into total darkness […] In the darkness, the theatre-goers try to find the exits; but in vain, and they get crushed, suffocated, at the doors to the corridors] (my translation).

Gas lighting was deadly, killing theatregoers at the Théâtre des Célestins in Lyon in 1873, the Opéra de Paris in 1874, the Brooklyn theatre in New York City and the Théâtre des arts in Rouen in 1876, the Théâtre de Montpellier in 1879, and at the Théâtre italien in Nice in 1880, killing seventy people just six months before the Ringtheater disaster. A fire caused by gas lighting would kill 186 people in the Exeter Theatre Royal in 1886.

In light of the gas fires described earlier, the development of electric lighting is emblematic of how, as May writes: 'Comfort and safety […] are no longer merely practical goals driven by the human instinct to maximize pleasure and minimize pain: they have become moral imperatives of the first order [which are] a central theme of the Western mind in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries'.[20] For

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[19] Louis Figuier, *Les nouvelles conquêtes de la science. L'électricité* [New conquests of science. Electricity], Gallica (1884). <https://gallica.bnf.fr/ark:/12148/bpt6k105447t.>, accessed 14 February 2023, 286.

[20] May, *Love: A New Understanding*, 205–6.

May, developments that help to reduce risk and increase comfort and safety in this period participate in a paradigm shift towards love of children becoming more dominant than erotic love, and it is in this light that I consider the electricity fairy. The promise of electricity, as suggested in Figuier's decrying of the dangers of gas, is to reduce risk; in this context she would be part of a new paradigm of love that placed the child in the centre.

Although the reduction of risk may be a determinant motivation for technological progress, a closer look at what was happening in popular entertainment in this period complicates May's thesis. Figuier at first blames 'gas' as such for the disasters, fittingly in a book which seeks to praise electricity. He ends his description of the Ringtheater fire with: 'Quelle est la cause de toutes ces catastrophes ? La même : le gaz' [What is the cause of all these catastrophes? The same: gas] (my translation).[21] A few pages later, however, another culprit emerges, one belonging to the aesthetic and emotional worlds rather than the technological: audiences were demanding ever greater intensity in the theatrical spectacle.

> Aujourd'hui que le nombre des pièces a féerie s'accroît tous les jours, par suite de l'abaissement du goût du public, par l'effet de la décadence et la générescence des théâtres, les représentations deviennent un danger permanent. A certains tableaux de féerie, la scène ne peut être regardée sans frémir […] Des tuyaux flexibles sillonnent le plancher de traînées laissant jaillir des languettes de feu sous les pas des acteurs et actrices, qui, au milieu de ces flammes sans protection, vont et viennent avec leurs manteaux, leurs robes traînantes, leurs jupons de gaze et de mousseline. Une étincelle, un tuyau crevé, et tout cela s'embrase.[22]
>
> [With the number of fairy plays growing daily, corresponding to the lowering standards of taste among audiences, and the effects of the decadence and degeneracy of theatres, performances have become a permanent danger. Certain fairy tableaux can no longer be watched without some frisson of terror […] Flexible pipes snake along the boards in tendrils allowing flickers of fire to burst from beneath the footsteps of the actors and actresses who, amongst these unprotected flames, come and go trailing their cloaks, their long dresses with trains, their gauze and muslin petticoats. One spark, one faulty pipe, and it all goes up in flames] (my translation).

The fact that the new electric stage lights at the Savoy theatre were first used in the same month as the Ringtheater fire illustrates the extent to which lightbulb technology was developed in direct response to gas light theatre disasters. During the interval before the second act of Patience on 28 December 1881,

21 Figuier, *Les nouvelles conquêtes de la science*, 286.
22 Figuier, *Les nouvelles conquêtes de la science*, 289.

D'Oyly Carte, the owner of the theatre, demonstrated how gauze cloth would not ignite when wrapped around a lightbulb: 'Mr Carte made a speech, in which he apparently stressed more than anything else the safety of electricity'.[23] This supports the idea of electricity being a part of a 'war on risk' on an infrastructural level at least, even if the 'war on risk' on a cultural level appears more dubious.

Figuier here correlates the demand for *féerie* or fairy plays with the number of disasters: *féerie* was causing gas lighting to be used in more risky ways. The vogue for lavishly dangerous theatre lighting suggests that it was powered by a demand 'to feel'; to experience the theatrical spectacle in ever more sensational ways. In this sense, it was not simply that gas lighting was dangerous and that it was replaced by the safer electric lighting; but that a desire to produce heightened emotions, sensory and magical experiences on stage surpassed the technical possibility to create these with gas light without the risk of entailing loss of life. *Féerie* literally brought the house down. Seen in this way, electricity can be understood as an achievement to stage ever greater risk, in a spectacular setting, while avoiding actual loss of life (and livelihoods).

The staging of emotions through *féerie* was produced by the Victorians' desire to be more confounded and amazed. While electricity would eventually mean that magic became more domesticated and quotidian, this was not yet the case in the 1880s, when it was part of magical entertainment. In their mid-late nineteenth-century guise, fairies of light were therefore treading a line between being technically safer, thanks to electricity, while trying to hold onto their bewitching and suspect lineage through *feux follets*, candlelight and gas light. There is a contradiction in terms in the name *fée électricité*, where the semantics of fairy light were encoded by less predictable, more risky forms of light. One wonders whether electricity companies' use of fairy imagery was an attempt to disguise the industrial, 'cold', characteristics of electricity, and connect it older forms of lighting that consumers were more comfortable with.[24]

In fiction, too, a 'war on risk' is not immediately identifiable. It is true that lighting entered the sphere of literary childhood at the turn of the twentieth century, in, for example, Frances Hodgson Burnett's *A Little Princess* (1900) and J. M. Barrie's *Peter Pan* (1904 for the play, 1911 for the novel).[25] In Marcel Proust's

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[23] Fletcher, 'Electricity at the Savoy', *Studies in English*, 158.

[24] The German electricity company AEG was the first to launch a logo showing a winged, naked goddess holding aloft a lightbulb, in 1888.

[25] Frances Hodgson Burnett, *A Little Princess* (London: Penguin, 2002); J. M. Barrie, *Peter Pan, or The Boy Who Would Not Grow Up* [play], Project Gutenberg (2003), <https://gutenberg.net.au/ebooks03/0300081h.html>, accessed 7 November 2023; J. M. Barrie, *Peter Pan* [*Peter and*

Swann's Way (1913) artificial light was the primary motif of childhood memory as the magic lantern. Possibly, lighting was a greater and more playful part of children's fiction now that – in the theatre – light (=electricity) signified safety, whereas before light (= gas) signified danger. Following May's argument, one reason why electricity seemed to be the pinnacle of modernity – exemplified by the fairy figure atop the palace at the 1900 World Fair – could be that it reflected and participated in wider social practices of love, in the domestic sphere such as the role of light in providing a home, to the artistic when conjuring representations of emotions on the stage. In this reading, electricity would be part of a broader emotional zeitgeist, with the concern for safety growing as love of children became the dominant paradigm of love. The stories themselves, however, have other ideas. The fictionalisation of the electricity fairy as Tinker Bell in *Peter Pan* complicates the idea of her electric status being part of a 'war on risk', as she is a fraught figure, threatening the core of parental love in the form of fear and risk of death. Rather than the domesticated, 'pretty' lighting that the term 'fairy lights' evokes today, in this era these lights belonged to the theatre, not yet to the nursery. Deceitful and manipulative, she embodies parents' anxieties about children being lured away 'to Neverland' or growing up away from parental influence to end up like Peter Pan and the 'lost boys'. She can be read as representing anxieties around changing technologies, a version of the electricity fairy who it might be wise not to trust. Tinker Bell is therefore an example of the ability of fiction to critique technological change, as opposed to the institutional representations of the electricity fairy introduced previously, in the public monument and the company-commissioned fresco.

Night lights

'Can anything harm us, mother, after the night-lights are lit?' asks Michael Darling in the first scene of *Peter Pan*. 'Nothing, precious', replies Mrs Darling, 'they are the eyes a mother leaves behind to guard her children'.[26] The foundational position that night lights occupy in Peter Pan as guardians of safety representing parental love ('Parental love is talismanic of the war on risk'[27]) could therefore support May's argument about a heightened awareness of risk concerning children at the time. The following illustration dramatically depicts the new light source

Wendy], Project Gutenberg (2008), <https://www.gutenberg.org/cache/epub/16/pg16-images.html>, accessed 7 November 2023.

26 Barrie 2003 [1904]).

27 May, *Love: A New Understanding*, 208.

Figure 9.6. F. D. Bedford, *Peter Flew In*, illustration from J. M. Barrie, *Peter and Wendy* (1911), based on his play *Peter Pan, or the Boy Who Never Grew Up* (1904), F. D. Bedford, public domain.

that enters the children's bedroom through the window. Tinkerbell is shown in this image as a ball of light, emanating sharp rays like a flash, the light casting dark shadows on the nursery wall. This image illustrates the striking influence of the electric light bulb on the figure of Tinkerbell. The ultimate 'fairy light', she outshines the light of the night lights apparently to such an extent that the illustrator has chosen not to depict them.

Giving a light to a child is certainly an ancient tool used by parents in a belief that it will calm children's imaginations at night. In his essay 'Tinker Bell, the Fairy of Electricity', Pomerance describes the Darlings' night lights

as 'vigilant'.[28] In French, a night light is *une veilleuse*, from the verb *veiller*, to watch over. The *veilleuse* therefore contains in French the idea of surveillance and supervision, of course linked etymologically to 'vigil'. *Une veillée* means an evening of collectively watching over or waiting for something, whether it is Christmas Eve, *la veillée de Noël*, or *la veillée mortuaire*, watching over a corpse on the night of a death. The idea of light-as-safety provided by a figure of authority, represented in *Peter Pan* by the children's night light (or so we are at first led to believe), recalls the nativity star sent by God to guide the three magi to the birth of Christ, recalling the confluence of light and power in Genesis: *fiat lux et facta est lux*. Barrie employs a well-used fairy tale technique by opening with a false sense of security.

Peter Pan's play on security/insecurity is structured using literary lighting, and at first glance it seems there is a simple dichotomy: the fantasy and danger animated by the light of the fairy, Tinkerbell, acts as a foil to the safety of home, represented by the nursery night lights. The literary lighting describes emotional landscapes: emotions associated with the safety of home, and their negative: risk. In the story, night lights are clearly placed to stand in the place of the absent Mr and Mrs Darling, with the stage direction in the play version: 'MRS DARLING lights the night-lights over the beds'.[29] As we read in the novel version, 'For a moment after Mr and Mrs Darling left the house the night-lights by the beds of the three children continued to burn clearly'.[30] As Elisabeth Bronfen writes in *Night Passages: Philosophy, Literature, and Film*, parents are 'placeholders of the nocturnal': it is the parents who decide whether there is light after the sun has set.[31] For a child, it is the adult caregiver, rather than their own bodies' circadian response to light and dark, that decide when night has begun, such as in the light evenings of summer. In fairy tales, this notion of power is taken up by the image of the fairy, whose powers of flight and casting spells undermine those of the mortal parent or nursery maid. The fairy-as-light is light that takes matters into their own hands, a perversion of the steady night light.

In *Peter Pan*, the night lights' correct functioning, however, depends on the parents' presence: they still burn clearly 'for a moment after' they leave the house.[32] Once gone, they lose control, and Barrie shows that there is something more sinister about these night lights, portrayed as being alive – but rather complacent

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28 Pomerance, 'Tinker Bell, the Fairy of Electricity', 19.

29 J. M. Barrie, *Peter Pan, or The Boy Who Would Not Grow Up.*

30 J. M. Barrie, *Peter Pan* [*Peter and Wendy*].

31 Elisabeth Bronfen, *Night Passages: Philosophy, Literature, and Film* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2013), 408.

32 J. M. Barrie, *Peter Pan* [*Peter and Wendy*].

– guardians: 'They were awfully nice little night-lights, and one cannot help wishing that they could have kept awake to see Peter; but Wendy's light blinked and gave such a yawn that the other two yawned also, and before they could close their mouths all the three went out'.[33] The fact of going out is suggested to be involuntary ('before they could close their mouths'), suggesting that another force has extinguished them. Mr and Mrs Darling have left the night lights in charge of the children, who are then extinguished. The children are vulnerable to what comes in the next sentence: 'There was another light in the room now, a thousand times brighter than the night-lights'.[34]

Fairy light is a direct challenge to parental control of lighting. Mrs Darling was initially in control of the night lights that were probably gas, oil or candles, but not this electric light, burning so much brighter, the 'thousand times' suggesting a scale out of a mortal parent's reach. Tinker Bell will lure Michael and his siblings to Neverland, making true the narrator's ominous statement about Michael's goodnight dialogue with his mother: 'They were the last words she was to hear from him for a long time'.[35] The night lights are therefore portrayed both as being innocent, 'awfully nice', but it is their complacency that allows the plot to unfold in risky ways. At the end of *Peter Pan*, the night lights are innocent again, placed in the same safety sphere as the family dog, Nana: 'Of course the Neverland had been make-believe in those days, but it was real now, and there were no night-lights, and it was getting darker every moment, and where was Nana?' The sense of rising panic of the children conveyed by the repeating 'and' which removes the syntactic security of the sense that the sentence will come to a close.[36] The way that Barrie plays with ambivalence in relation to night lights successfully undermines an artificial, fantasy vision of the nocturnal world that parents believe in, in which it could really be possible to shut out the darkness. As Jacqueline Rose points out in *The Case of Peter Pan, or the Impossibility of Children's Fiction*, children's literature is an adult's fantasy of the child.[37] With its simplified linguistic forms, it presents an infantile view of innocence, imagined by the adult. In this way, the novel is speaking to an adult readership more than to that of a child: 'children's literature cannot be understood as the passive reflection of changing values and conceptions of the child (images *of* childhood); instead I see it as one of the central means through which we regulate our relationship to language

[33] J. M. Barrie, *Peter Pan* [*Peter and Wendy*].
[34] J. M. Barrie, *Peter Pan* [*Peter and Wendy*].
[35] J. M. Barrie, *Peter Pan* [*Peter and Wendy*].
[36] J. M. Barrie, *Peter Pan* [*Peter and Wendy*].
[37] Jacqueline Rose, *The Case of Peter Pan, Or the Impossibility of Children's Fiction*. (Pennsylvania: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1993), 5.

and images as such'.[38] *Peter Pan* pokes fun at the fantasy of control and influence by way of light over a night-time world of genuine and unknowable danger, that will enter the minds of sleeping children whatever they try to do to prevent it.

Domesticating the electric fairy

May writes about how the shift towards the love of the child as the archetypal model of love coincides with a greater interest in everyday existence; of the 'the child's role in relocating the sacred to this finite, everyday life'.[39] Charting archetypes of love from the divine to the domestic, this is also (perhaps coincidentally) the trajectory of the relationship between fairies and lights, as light is domesticated, enclosed in bulbs, and turned into a servant.

The iconographic history of *la fée électricité* is not linear, as she moves between representations as a goddess to those of a slave between the 1880s and 1930s. In Tinker Bell, electricity has become the 'diligent worker'. Quoting Alexandre Fernandez' 1998 book *Économie et Politique de l'Electricité de Bordeaux, 1887–1956*, Pomerance observes that 'electricity had been seen as a "fairy" form because of its association with luxury, play, and fun; and that it became, after its use as a utility, a servant'. Yet he wonders about how useful this simplistic chronology can be, because electricity was applied in so many different areas of life that it has multiple significations.[40] Albert Robida's 1890 book of satirical drawings: *Le Vingtième siècle: La Vie Electrique*, places *la fée électricité* in the science fiction genre as a slave-like Andromeda charged with engines.[41] Satire is useful, here, to understand the place of *la fée électricité* as it appeals to a popular version of her, reassessing her as a cultural figure as she is being established. The sense of insecurity brought by the electric presence in the night nursery of Tinker Bell can be understood in the context of Robida's representation of electricity, in which she is a dead-eyed but highly eroticised presence, generating power in the company of hordes of demonic nymphs.

On this cover of a 1923 book about the benefits of electricity, written by an electrical engineer, the *fée électricité* is depicted as a winged goddess with neoclassical coiled hair and tiered dress.[42] In her left hand she holds aloft a lightbulb of

38 Rose, *The Case of Peter Pan*, 138–9.

39 May, *Love: A New Understanding*, 232.

40 Pomerance, 'Tinker Bell, the Fairy of Electricity', 17.

41 Albert Robida, *La vie électrique: le vingtième siècle* (1892), <https://gallica.bnf.fr/ark:/12148/bpt6k101948n>, accessed 16 February 2023.

42 Henri Letorey, *Je vous offre la santé, la gaité, l'économie, le bien être. Je suis la fée électricité*, Gallica (1923). <https://gallica.bnf.fr/ark:/12148/bpt6k5496070z>, accessed 14 February 2023.

Figure 9.7 Albert Robida, Frontispiece of *La Vie Électrique* by Albert Robida (1890), public domain. Version produced by Bruce Albrecht, Claudine Corbasson, and the Online Distributed Proofreading Team at <http://www.pgdp.net>.

the Edison design. In her right hand an object, either a mirror or a magnifying glass, sends out jagged rays like lightning. In the lightning's path, antiquated technologies are tumbling into an abyss: a lump of coal is helpfully labelled as such – 'CHARBON' – and is caught in an ungainly fall; a canister of oil wearing heeled ankle boots sprints to the exit in a wide stride, as does a traditional-looking bell in trousers and shoes, its pull-cord swirling behind it as it runs. At the top of the falling rubbish, a horse is bolting from its stable, and what looks like a gasworks is in mid-explosion.

On the other side of the image, a romantic landscape with tall pine trees, a majestic waterfall and towering peaks is crisscrossed by a nifty little tram, its electric wires neatly threading through the tree line and taking over the geometric trajectory of the waterfall as if they were a part of the natural landscape. While the

Figure 9.8. Anon., Front cover of Henri Letorey, *Je vous offre la santé, la gaité, l'économie, le bien être. Je suis la fée électricité* (1923). Reproduced with permission from Philippe Lortscher / Musée Electropolis, Mulhouse, France.

left side of the image is a tumble of broken bric-à-brac, the right side is an ideal of nature in harmony with human invention. The middle prominently features an electricity generator, between the contrasting sides. The fairy's dainty toe touches it, as if it were her plinth. Through ringlet wires, the fairy's divine power is carried to the electric tram. Harmony is thus made possible by the electricity fairy as though, having experimented during the previous century with all the junk on the left side of the image, humankind has at last invented a harmonious coexistence between nature and artifice.

The text, translated as, 'I give you health, joy, economy, well-being. I am the electricity fairy', uses typesetting to place electricity on the same plane as four other fundamentals of human flourishing. The Dufy fresco pictured at the start of this essay and the book cover show how the electricity fairy was portrayed as

a divine power that touched everyday objects and social practices, where 'joy' appears next to 'economy' in a list as if they were part of the same sphere of meaning. The electricity fairy operates a collapse between the everyday act of turning on a lamp and conjuring beauty or restoring harmony to nature. Everyday domestic acts are therefore imbued with the magical or the sacred. Rather than having been sacred to then become banal, she exists somewhere between the divine and the housewife's companion. The fairy seems to have assumed her most stable cultural form as Disney's Tinker Bell,[43] whose use by the US Department for Energy has a 'revamped' energy-saving fairy. Lisa Rowe Fraustino amusingly critiques in a 2013 essay, quoting a 2009 public service advertisement: 'The magical thing about using energy wisely […] is that anyone can do it. Use energy saving light bulbs […] energy smart power strips […] Learn what you can do today at energy.gov/tink'.[44] Following the arc of domestication to this public service advertisement, it is certain that the electricity fairy participated in an emotional paradigm shift from extraordinary spectacle to dull infomercial. It seems that the imaginary figure of the fairy has been instrumentalised to associate electricity with the childhood magic of *féerie* and fairy plays, displacing awe and wonder from the domains of science and industry to those of fiction and entertainment. While this domestication signalling a turn towards the love of the child replacing erotic love as a dominant form of love is a bold claim, May's conclusions are appealing. The new focus on everyday existence perhaps needs to be examined alongside the philosophical move discussed in the first section to merit being called a paradigm shift.

Conclusion

Writing the story of the electricity fairy into the story of the development of love has shown the extent to which technological innovations are bound up in social and cultural change, and vice versa. The association of the fairy with electric light from the 1800s onwards coincided with phenomena identified by May that signal a paradigm shift towards the love of children replacing erotic love as the dominant form. Fairy light was part of this paradigm shift, where 'becoming' was privileged over 'being', where notions of risk entered a new age of ambivalence related to fiction and illusions, and growing domestication dampened the age of *féerie*, before the First World War would put an end to the Belle époque.

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43 Geronimi, Clyde, et al., *Peter Pan* (RKO Radio Pictures, 1953).

44 Lisa Rowe Fraustino, 'Disney Neverland's Tinker Bell', in Anja Müller ed., *Adapting Canonical Texts in Children's Literature* (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2013), 215.

As well as new lighting technologies articulating a changing emotional landscape, the ability to create new lighting effects of sudden light and darkness, twinkling and light in motion may, of course, have influenced these emotions themselves. As we know from twenty-first century living, technological devices have affordances that can give way to new emotions and guide the arcs of emotional lives. Studying this historically presents particular challenges, but exploring the role of technological devices in the arts has provided insight in the case of *Peter Pan*.

Further investigation could take the idea of childhood and magic and extend it to the notion of 'beginnings': like the beginning of any story, the love of children may be bound up in the potential of transformation that the child represents. In the same way, the beginning of a romantic or erotic love story is given privilege in fiction over the later everyday developments of the relationship. The popularity of lighting devices in fiction, theatre, advertising and statecraft we have explored in this piece emphasises the desire to believe in things that carry a potential for transformation, and this magic may be what we mean by love.

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