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A Note on Sylvia Townsend Warner's 'The Kingdom of Elfin' (1927)

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On 5 October 1927, the popular British women's magazine *Eve: The Lady's Pictorial* published a two-page article by Sylvia Townsend Warner entitled 'The Kingdom of Elfin'. This short piece contains a number of engaging, loosely organised observations about elfin lore, and it anticipates many of the topics Warner developed in the 1960s and 1970s in her fairy stories eventually published in the 1977 collection *Kingdoms of Elfin: Strange Tales of the Fantastic, the Sinister and the Impossible*. She describes the intellectual superiority and sophistication of 'the Little People', along with their disdain for human beings, these inferior creatures subject to mischievous assaults that can variously lead to 'languishing sickness', 'ignominious accidents', and even 'death'. Warner's article touches on interspecies romance (the case of 'the Lady Tiphaine, wife of Bertrand du Guesclin') and on the fairy custom of stealing 'human children, putting a changeling babe in their place'. She briefly cites names and topographies that will later become familiar to readers of the 1977 collection: the forest Brocéliande, for instance, described by the Norman poet Robert Wace, the author of *Roman de Rou* (1160), who is referenced in the story 'The Revolt at Brocéliande'. She also cites the folklorist Robert Kirk, whose work *The Secret Commonwealth* (1815) will later be mentioned in 'The Occupation'.

Warner might have been glancing back at her own piece, written fifty years earlier, when in 1977 she wrote that 'it is an error to say "the Kingdom of Elfin": the Kingdoms of Elfin are as numerous as kingdoms were in the Europe of the nineteenth century, and as diverse'.¹ The 1927 article certainly has a less diversified sense of the elfin world. It does not mention the geographical differences or the social stratifications that Warner would evoke so vividly in the later stories.² Here, there is little

attempt to fine-tune observations or deal with the particulars that structure life and social relationships in the elfin world. It is no surprise, therefore, that Warner chose the singular and not the plural form of the word 'kingdom' for the earlier title. The *Eve* article, it seems, was written to develop readers' interest in the supernatural that had been associated, since the 1926 publication of *Lolly Willowes*, with Warner's work. A more detailed exploration of the very same material would have to wait for a few more decades. Nonetheless, this early piece confirms that Warner had a lifelong interest in the fairy theme; it bears out the 1974 diary entry in which she records: 'I read ballads, & realised how early I was blooded to Elfin'.³ When she began to write elfin stories for the *New Yorker* in the 1960s, she was returning to a world she had visited long before. As it turns out, this topic was as central to her early writerly explorations as it was to the final parts of her life and career.

The magazine in which Warner's short article was published also merits further comment. It positions Warner explicitly in relation to the literary economies that emerged in Britain in the 1920s. While *Eve* had a relatively short lifespan as a women's weekly – publication began in 1919 and ceased in 1929 when it merged with the current affairs compendium *Britannia* – it was known for its interest in publishing and disseminating the work of many women authors who are now associated with the modernist movement.⁴ Apart from Warner's contributions, this publication, targeted at middle-class, female readers, featured work by or about Elizabeth Bowen, Bryher, Radclyffe Hall, Winifred Holtby, Storm Jameson, Rosamond Lehmann, Anita Loos, Rose Macaulay, Jean Rhys, Edith Sitwell, Rebecca West, Edith Wharton, and Virginia Woolf. The majority of its features focussed on fashion, society news, sport, and women's domestic responsibilities, but the sporadic appearance of work by or about modernist women writers suggests that the magazine and these writers were engaged in a productive process of reciprocal promotion. Publication in the magazine helped to popularise the names of aspiring young writers. Elizabeth Bowen, for one, recalled that publishing in *Eve* was a symbolic event in her attempt to conquer a 1920s' literary marketplace that 'cared, it seemed, for nothing but the establishment'.⁵ And *Eve*'s editors similarly capitalised on the reputation of the writers whose work they reviewed and printed. When Warner is introduced as the 'Author of "Lolly Willowes" and "Mr. Fortune's Maggot"' in the editorial apparatus of 'The Kingdom of Elfin', the editor not only showcases the talent of this emerging new writer but indirectly suggests the sophistication and the aspirational agenda of the magazine. Warner is acknowledged as a writer of repute, known for her novels and

therefore deemed worthy to appear in *Eve* – a magazine designed to be an important reflector of 1920s’ cultural tastes.

The discovery of this early Warner piece on elfin lore, printed here for the first time since its original publication in 1927, will hopefully encourage scholars to seek further continuities between her earlier and her later works. It might also remind her critics that Warner was in the early years of her career an important figure in Britain’s interwar literary culture, identified as a successful and highly esteemed novelist. It would be timely to develop further studies on Warner’s relationship to the interwar and post-war publishing industry and to the cult of celebrity authorship developing in those years. Such work would not only contribute to current scholarship on Warner but also to critical explorations of the development and the history of twentieth-century British women’s writing – a literary tradition still ripe for further expansions, revisions, and critical assessments.

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Notes

- 1 Sylvia Townsend Warner, *Kingdoms of Elfin: Strange Tales of the Fantastic, the Sinister and the Impossible* (London: Penguin, 1979), p. 15.
- 2 For a more detailed exploration of the social hierarchies distinguishing the elfin world Warner describes in her later stories, see Hannah Priest, ‘The Unnaturalness of a Society: Class Division and Conflict in Sylvia Townsend Warner’s *Kingdoms of Elfin*’, *The Journal of the Sylvia Townsend Warner Society* (2010), pp. 1–16.
- 3 *The Diaries of Sylvia Townsend Warner*, ed. Claire Harman (London: Chatto & Windus, 1994), p. 369.
- 4 See Vike Martina Plock, ‘“A Journal of the Period”: Modernism and Conservative Modernity in *Eve: The Lady’s Pictorial*’, in *The Edinburgh Companion to Women’s Print Media in Interwar Britain (1918–1939)*, eds. Catherine Clay, Maria DiCenzo, Barbara Green, Fiona Hackney (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, forthcoming).
- 5 Elizabeth Bowen, *Afterthought: Pieces about Writing* (London: Longmans, 1962), p. 90.