

"[The Spectator] Issue 419,  
Tuesday, July 1, 1712"

By Joseph Addison

*Transcription, correction, editorial commentary, and markup by Project  
Gutenberg and Staff and Research Assistants at The University of Virginia*

THE SPECTATOR, #419

-----mentis gratissimus Error, <sup>mentis</sup> Hor.

*Tuesday, July 1, 1712.*

There is a kind of Writing, wherein the Poet quite loses Sight of Nature, and entertains his Reader's Imagination with the Characters and Actions of such Persons as have many of them no Existence, but what he bestows on them. Such are Fairies, Witches, Magicians, Demons, and departed Spirits. This Mr. *Dryden* calls *the Fairie Way of Writing* , which is, indeed, more difficult than any other that depends on the Poet's Fancy, because he has no Pattern to follow in it, and must work altogether out of his own Invention.

There is a very odd Turn of Thought required for this sort of Writing, and it is impossible for a Poet to succeed in it, who has not a particular Cast of Fancy, and an Imagination naturally fruitful and superstitious. Besides this, he ought to be very well versed in Legends and Fables, antiquated Romances, and the Traditions of Nurses and old Women, that he may fall in with our natural Prejudices, and humour those Notions which we have imbibed in our Infancy. For otherwise he will be apt to make his Fairies talk like People of his own Species, and not like other Setts of Beings, who converse with different Objects, and think in a different Manner from that of Mankind;

*Sylvis deducti caveant, me Judice, Fauni,* <sup>Sylvis</sup>  
*Ne velut innati triviis ac pæne forenses*  
*Aut nimium teneris juvenentur versibus*-----

I do not say with Mr. *Bays* in the *Rehearsal* , that Spirits must not be confined to speak Sense, but it is certain their Sense ought to be a little discoloured, that it may seem particular, and proper to the Person and the Condition of the Speaker.

These Descriptions raise a pleasing kind of Horrour in the Mind of the Reader, and amuse his Imagination with the Strangeness and Novelty of the Persons who are represented in them. They bring up into our Memory the Stories we have heard in our Childhood, and favour those secret Terrors and Apprehensions to which the Mind of Man is naturally subject. We are pleased with surveying the different Habits and Behaviours of Foreign Countries, how much more must we be delighted and surprised when we are led, as it were, into a new Creation, and see the Persons and Manners of another Species? Men of cold Fancies, and Philosophical Dispositions, object to this kind of Poetry, that it has not Probability enough to affect the Imagination. But to this it may be answered, that we are sure, in general, there are many Intellectual Beings in the World besides our selves, and several Species of Spirits, who are subject to different Laws and œconomies from those of Mankind; when we see, therefore, any of these represented naturally, we cannot look upon the Representation as altogether impossible; nay, many are prepossessed with such false Opinions, as dispose them to believe these particular Delusions; at least, we have all heard so many pleasing Relations in favour of them, that we do not care for seeing through the Falshood, and willingly give our selves up to so agreeable an Imposture.

The Ancients have not much of this Poetry among them, for, indeed, almost the whole Substance of it owes its Original to the Darkness and Superstition of later Ages, when pious Frauds were made use of to amuse Mankind, and frighten them into a Sense of their Duty. Our Forefathers look'd upon Nature with more Reverence and Horrour, before the World was enlightened by Learning and Philosophy, and lov'd to astonish themselves with the Apprehensions of Witchcraft, Prodigies, Charms and Enchantments. There was not a Village in England, that had not a Ghost in it, the Church-yards were all haunted, every large Common had a Circle of Fairies belonging to it, and there was scarce a Shepherd to be met with who had not seen a Spirit.

Among all the Poets of this Kind our *English* are much the best, by what I have yet seen; whether it be that we abound with more Stories of this Na-

- Verso -

ture, or that the Genius of our Country is fitter for this sort of Poetry. For the English are naturally fanciful, and very often disposed by that Gloominess and Melancholy of Temper, which is so frequent in our Nation, to many wild Notions and Visions, to which others are not so liable.

Among the *English* , *Shakespear* has incomparably excelled all others. That noble Extravagance of Fancy which he had in so great Perfection, thoroughly qualified him to touch this weak superstitious Part of his Reader's Imagination; and made him capable of succeeding, where he had nothing to support him besides the Strength of his own Genius. There is something so wild and yet so solemn in the Speeches of his Ghosts, Fairies, Witches and the like Imaginary Persons, that we cannot forbear thinking them natural, tho' we have no rule by which to judge of them, and must confess, if there are such Beings in the World, it looks highly probable that they should talk and act as he has represented them.

There is another sort of imaginary Beings, that we sometimes meet with among the Poets, when the Author represents any Passion, Appetite, Virtue or Vice, under a visible Shape, and makes it a Person or an Actor in his Poem. Of this Nature are the Descriptions of Hunger and Envy in *Ovid* , of Fame in *Virgil* , and of

Sin and Death in *Milton* . We find a whole Creation of the like Shadowy Persons in Spencer, who had an admirable Talent in Representations of this kind. I have discoursed of these Emblematical Persons in former Papers, and shall therefore only mention them in this Place. Thus we see how many Ways Poetry addresses it self to the Imagination, as it has not only the whole Circle of Nature for its Province, but makes new Worlds of its own, shews us Persons who are not to be found in Being, and represents even the Faculties of the Soul, with her several Virtues and Vices, in a sensible Shape and Character.

I shall, in my two following Papers, consider in general, how other kinds of Writing are qualified to please the Imagination, with which I intend to conclude this Essay.

O.

## Footnotes

mentis "A very pleasing illusion." From the *Epistles* by the Roman poet Horace.

Sylvis "When the Fauns are brought from the forest, they should, methinks, beware of behaving as though born at the crossways and almost as dwelling in the Forum, playing at times the young bloods with their mawkish verses, or cracking their bawdy and shameless jokes." From the *Ars Poetica* by Horace.