

Sympathy, Suffering, and Reform in Mary de Morgan's Fairy Tales

Although Mary de Morgan's literary fairy tales are set in a fantastic past that does not overtly resemble the late-Victorian England in which she wrote, many of her tales endorse social reform that is based on listening to and empathizing with marginalized characters. In tales such as "The Heart of Princess Joan," "The Hair Tree," and "Siegfrid and Handa," kingdoms and villages fall into disarray because bad leaders refuse to empathize with others, and are saved by protagonists who can turn their kind feelings into action on others' behalf, even if they have to suffer hardships themselves. In "The Heart of Princess Joan," Joan's heart is stolen by a malicious fairy, leaving her emotionless and uncaring. When her suitor Michael finds the heart after a grueling quest, restores it, and marries her, the people exclaim, "now we are sure of a good King." Here, a good ruler is one who feels deeply for others, and is willing to labor for years to help them do the same. "The Hair Tree" and "Seigfrid and Handa" also feature empathetic male protagonists who succeed at their quests and deliver their communities from uncaring, exploitative rulers because they are willing to aid women, children, and animals whom those in power have abused or ignored.

De Morgan's use of literary fairy tales as social critique does not happen in a vacuum; she was an active supporter of women's suffrage and was closely connected with the Arts and Crafts movement. She was a lifelong friend of the artist and socialist William Morris, and told many of her tales to his children. De Morgan thus would have been well aware of the ways in which neo-medieval settings could be used to critique contemporary British socio-economic structures, and her tales should be understood within that context.