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Thirst for Enchanted Views in Ruskin's *The King of the Golden River*

Jane Merrill Filstrup

Children's Literature

Johns Hopkins University Press

Volume 8, 1980

pp. 68-79

10.1353/chl.0.0675

ARTICLE

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In lieu of an abstract, here is a brief excerpt of the content:

Thirst for Enchanted Views in Ruskin's *The King of the Golden River*

Jane Merrill Filstrup (bio)

And gifted of God is he who saith:—
In the morn I am richest of men
And in joy at good news I start up
For I look on the liquid gold
And I measure it out by the cup.¹

In his autobiographical work *Praeterita*, John Ruskin speaks of his precocious love of nature. He requested at age three-and-one-half that his portraitist paint the distant hills in the background of the picture blue.² From a very young age Ruskin perceived nature as a dramatic arena in which strong emotions were represented. As an art critic, he derived his aesthetic genius from his childhood passion for wondrous natural forms and for strange, undomesticated realms of enchantment.

Ruskin complains in *Praeterita* that as a child he was never "off duty."³ His upbringing was planned, leaving no time for play or privacy. Even Oxford provided no escape from parental attention, for Mrs. Ruskin came to the university to care for her son's health and dined with him each evening. An almost singular retreat from this hothouse upbringing was to read exotic adventures like *The Arabian Nights* and *Robinson Crusoe* and fairy tales. Marcel Proust remarks in *Du Côté de chez Swann* that light reading given to children often has a high sensual content which in other forms is forbidden to the child within the family circle.⁴ Ruskin's two favorite children's books, *Dame Wiggins of Lee and Her Seven Wonderful Cats* and *German Popular Stories* (the first English-language Brothers Grimm, illustrated with etchings by George Cruikshank) disclose the perilous adventures of faerie to a child's mind.

That Ruskin prized *Dame Wiggins* is significant in terms of his own writing for children. Drolleries animate this nonsense tale in [End Page 68] verse, which, after the fashion of many Regency picture-books, encased fancy in didactic purport. Largely independent of the text, Dame Wiggins's feline retinue console their mistress with Punch-and-Judy antics. Woodblock prints of the "fierce wisker'd crew" illustrate cats astride geese or mounted on sheep, cats returning in wherries from the underworld, and cats waiting for mates. In the final woodcut all the cats,

the Dame, and a prosperous new caller (the neighboring farmer) sit around a festal board. The cats raise their goblets in a toast to ribald adventure and to the persistence of sensual thirst. The suggestion of a witch's sabbat almost conjures an aphrodisiac drink.

Ruskin as a middle-aged man published an expanded edition of *Dame Wiggins*. To the anonymous chapbook he added several stanzas of his own. When Ruskin invited Kate Greenaway to do drawings for the new manuscript, he expressed reservations that Greenaway, known for her wreathed and silk-slipped ingenues, would not be able to capture the spirit of the cats.⁵ In the Ruskin/ Greenaway version of *Dame Wiggins* (1885), Satan's school becomes a school of moral correction in which a village schoolmaster teaches the pussies to spell "mew" and "wash their faces before tea." Ruskin "rectified" his childhood fantasies to please a late-Victorian readership.

Ruskin wrote *The King of the Golden River, or The Black Brothers; a Legend of Styria* in 1841, when he was twenty-two; but it was not published until 1851, when Smith, Elders, and Company of London brought it out in plain boards with gilt edges. Henry Vizetelly was the printer. The twenty-one illustrations and the cover design were drawn on wood by Richard Doyle and engraved, for the most part, by the well-known team of George and Edward Dalziel. The book rapidly went through three printings (called editions) in 1851. A copy which is presently in the Berg Collection of the New York Public Library was already in the possession of Lewis Carroll in that first year.

"Water of Life," the folktale which Ruskin took as a model for *The King of the Golden River*, was one of the *German Popular Stories*, though not one accompanied by a Cruikshank illustration. [End Page 69]



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Title ...

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