

The Xanas



Salvador Rueda

Introductory note by Mariano Martín Rodríguez
and translation by Álvaro Piñero González

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Fairies are probably some of the best-known elementals. Although they are not counted among the Paracelsian ones (gnomes, undines, sylphs and salamanders), they are described in very similar terms to those both in literature and in popular belief. They are, indeed, natural beings endowed with powers superior to humans ones, but devoid of soul and often limited to particular functions and behaviours in their natural environment. Unlike men and gods, their agency shows limited diversity, and their acts seem to obey to an imprinted instinct rather than to be the product of free will. Both Paracelsian elementals and the elementals from European folklore (e.g., dwarves, giants, dragons, elves, fairies, etc.) are often able to intervene in the lives of humans in literature, from fairy tales to modern fantasy focusing on those supernatural beings. However, their rather fixed nature allows for their description, as they were just members of a natural species. There are today many encyclopaedias on all known kinds of elementals and on their 'natural' ways, for instance, Dugald Steer's *Dragonology: The Complete Book of Dragons* (2003). There are also some descriptions of their supposed physical features and their customs written with rather literary purposes, using a rhetorically rich and ornate language in order to convey some of the perceived poetry and mystery

featuring in different species of elemental beings. This is the case, for instance, of the Symbolist piece in prose titled "Vie des Elfes" ('Life of elves,' collected in *Les Danaïdes* in 1903, and again in *Le mystère du visage* in 1906) by one of the most unfairly forgotten masters of the Aesthetic Movement in Europe, Camille Mauclair (*nom de plume* of Camille Faust, 1872-1945).

In that same Movement, one could also mention regarding the literary 'natural history' of elementals another writer who also described a species of elemental between science and literature, and who is now being reappraised as a significant Parnassian poet in his home country Spain. Salvador Rueda (1857-1933) used highly musical and ornate verse in order to describe a particular kind of fairies (the female beings from European folklore, not the tiny and slightly ridiculous creatures from Victorian and Edwardian tales!) according to the popular lore of the Spanish North Western region of Asturias, where they are called 'xanas' in the local *Kulturdiialekt*. Rueda described in the poem "The xanas" ("Las xanas" in the Castilian original text)¹ their natural

¹ The translation is based on the original text from the following edition: Salvador Rueda, "Las xanas," *Obras completas: Poesía II (1891-1900)*, edición, introducción y notas de Antonio Aguilar y Antonio A. Gómez Yebra,

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environment in the valley streams of a mountainous region whose location is not described with any geographical accuracy. Thus, Rueda was able to depict the ‘xanas’ as elementals not linked to a particular region, but potentially present in any place having features similar to those of the beautiful, and beautifully described, setting of his poem.

Its first lines are devoted to the scene of the awakening of the xanas from their nocturnal slumber. The description is focused first on their natural scenery, from where they emerge as beings endowed with supernatural beauty, a beauty matching that of their landscape. The xanas’ appearance expresses their positive and material existence. This can be seen in the use of mineral similes in their description. Also their supernatural and rather spiritual features manifest themselves in their relating to fog and the mention to their “ideal transparencies.”

The description of their works follows using a rhetoric structure based on a generous use of similes and other tropes. While everything sleeps in nature, they weave colours, forms and lights to create the most delicate beauties of nature, from the sky to the waters, from flowers to the heraldic animal of the Aesthetic Movement—the swan. The purpose of their existence is, indeed, this: “to make the beauties of the world and its marvellous adornments” thanks to their art and science, this is to say, the combined powers which Rueda has

succeeded in showing as proper to beings who are both material and spiritual in his poem, the ending of which is symmetrical to its beginning. The initial scene of awakening is echoed by the final peaceful sleeping of the xanas, after having perfectly fulfilled their magical task. There is a periodically reoccurring work that follows the rhythms of undisturbed nature. Consequently, their eternal return keeps working an idealised kind of natural world, from which all ugliness is banned. Humankind is also fully absent, as well as all human creations. Unlike the fairy stories where elementals help or punish humans, or even fall in love with them, as it also happens in most oral tales about the xanas themselves, the setting of Rueda’s poem seems to be a fantasy secondary world which is fully balanced and entirely beautiful. To be more accurate, it is a fantasy world still located in ours, as the allusions to queens and virginal brides show, but it appears to be a parallel place to our artificial world, a place that can nonetheless be accessed through fiction and poetry. Despite its origin in folklore, Rueda’s imaginary world of the xanas is rather a literary subcreation in the Tolkienian sense. As such, it is one of the earliest and best-written ones in Spain, and it deserves therefore to be better known, if only to demonstrate that fantasies with elementals existed with their own features in Southern Europe as well.

Málaga, Universidad de Málaga, 2016, p. 102-105. We thank Jonathan Deroo for his revising both the introductory note and the translation.

Salvador Rueda

The Xanas

The fog is rising from the valleys, seeking refuge through leafy hillsides in mountains' peaks. The moon shimmers on the fountains' waves and its light dances on the romping waters. In the air, the trembling molecules, which in the stillness of night have their invisible party, are throbbing. Out of the spring resounding threads of water splash onto the rocks, while the frog croaks on its crag.

Everything sighs in silence and now out of the restless waters, drowsily swaying amidst the verdure, the xanas emerge to weave their skeins, singing, their eyes green and their manes hanging. Their eyes are of gold, their fingers of pearl and their tiny figures of nacre. Necklaces of fresh water reflecting the twinkling of moonlight glitter on their necks. A wisp of fog tightens to their vaporous bodies as if it were a fine robe of ideal transparencies.

* * *

As everything lies asleep, they awake and ready their looms to undertake their work. Behold how the thin needles, the fine silk, the threads of beautiful colours, the thimbles and the scissors come out of the water – sundry colours shining on their balls of yarn, from hyacinth's blue to cherry's red.

Lazily poised on cushions of foam, the xanas weave and spin the weft and warp of their very light fabrics. They embroider the veils of dawn with carmines, intertwine in the stitches the dew with the strand, and with their little hands they fold the purple mantle of the evening

and place there with magical art a bright star. The blue arch of the waves they embroider with silver and snow so that these can blanket the soft sands. They brush and comb the swan's light wings with the greatest care and shine them by caressing them against their ivory cheeks.

The xanas softly prune and embellish the white lilies growing in pots, and weave the veil of fine gemstones enriched, in which pure virgins enter shrouded their wedding bed. They also curl and raise the spiral of the winged incense and make the sparkling dress of fairies and queens. Out of their long manes they take brilliant strands and make the distant stars' tassels of light.

The sleepy moon, which presides the night time, lends them its glare and comes down to play with them. A deep silence reigns in the clear night as their mysterious works spread across the restless ponds. The xanas dedicate their art and science to make the beauties of the world and its marvellous adornments.

As the night comes to its end and the light of a new day breaks the horizon bringing the Asturian peaks into clarity, so go the gracious and beautiful xanas into their slumber under the waves – the first sun's golden arrows already piercing the fog. They go to their abode's beds and half-close their eyes until weariness finally shuts them. When the moon's eternal lamp shines again at its fullest, the xanas will come out once more and begin their labour. Until then the flowing waves, as if hammocks were, will sway them and the song of the water splashing on the crags will lull them.