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A Sprinkling of Fairy Dust: Magicking Artificial Intelligence with the Sparkles Emoji

In a very short space of time, the sparkles emoji has become synonymous with generative artificial intelligence (AI), having been appropriated by online platforms to promote AI assistance. Using research into the folklore of magical helpers and historical examples of magic in the advertisement of technology, this essay will demonstrate how using this symbol associated with magic and wonder to promote AI is an example of how folklore is harnessed to normalize technological progress.

Keywords (from the AFS Ethnographic Thesaurus): Artificial intelligence; technology; magic; fairies; pixie dust; electricity; mass media

With a wave of Fairy Godmother's wand and a spiral of glimmering sparkles, Cinderella's rags are transformed into a beautiful ballgown. A shower of pixie dust brings Wendy, John and Michael soaring into the air. With the click of a button, this 4,756-word article will be neatly summarized, with all the key points laid out for you. The ubiquity of generative artificial intelligence (AI) in digital life has unfolded at a relentless pace since the start of the present decade, and with it a visual culture that has become indistinguishable from its usage—that of the sparkles symbol, in Internet parlance known as the sparkles emoji. It is now widely used as a heraldic symbol for AI assistance tools that have been integrated into browsers, applications and online publications. In some forms of media, sparkles have been used as a visualization of magic, particularly in Disney animation features such as with the Fairy Godmother in the 1950 film *Cinderella* and with pixie dust in the 1953 film *Peter Pan.* Sparkles therefore carry an associative meaning with the concept of magical helpers in visual culture..

I argue that folkloric and cultural associations of magic with the sparkles emoji in the context of AI assistance's direct purpose can be linked to folkloric figures in a two-fold manner: first as a link to magical helpers and agents and then to how magical beings have been highly useful in promoting technology during the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. Following Priscilla Denby's classification in *Folklore in the Mass Media* (1971), I argue that the appropriation of the sparkles emoji by digital software and generative AI companies

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constitutes folklore as folklure. Resources from folkloristic studies like Katharine Briggs' (1967) on British hearth sprites provide context on magical beings that perform tasks as a service to humans and helps us see how this has featured in historic uses of folklore as folklure for the promotion of household appliances and innovative technology.

I also demonstrate how the use of the sparkles emoji—and its cultural construct as a visualization of magic—upholds a continuation of folkloric belief about miraculous magical feats that goes beyond marketing and branding. Magic in this instance is that which is associated with magical helpers or agents, as defined by Vladimir Propp (1968), wherein a magical being uses magic as a form of aid to the story's hero, which bears relevance to contemporary use of generative AI. If sparkles elucidate a perception of the AI assistant as magical—in its instantaneous facilitation of reading, analysing or creating—then this phenomenon can be considered a contemporary example of how folklore has been, and continues to be, a suitable accomplice to engaging the public with burgeoning technological milestones through perceived folkloric notions of magical assistance and enchantment.

The History and Visual Culture of Sparkles

To understand a semiotic connection between sparkles and magic, it is necessary to examine the visual history of sparkles. Karl Bell argues that magic has always been perceived in the context of modernity, rather than as a survivalist relic, where "one sees the transformation of both magical signifiers and what they signified" (2012:81). This is pertinent to the way in which magic has developed from a social and psychological understanding to a concept that has been adapted by modern visual media in the age of photography and cinema.

The visualization of sparkles, whether descriptive or illustrative, is most closely associated with the concept of fairy dust. The first mention of fairy dust in the English language, according to the Oxford English Dictionary,[1] is in the Robert Browning poem *Sordello* (1848:71), although it was popularized to a far greater and wider extent in J.M. Barrie's *Peter Pan* (1928). In Barrie's play, and later novel, the fairy dust is an inherently magical substance, allowing the children to fly (Barrie 1928a:35). Interestingly, Barrie only introduced the concept of fairy dust to the stage play and its novelization after complaints from parents that their children were injuring themselves by copying the Darling children and throwing themselves off their beds (Barrie 1928b:6). This illustrates Denby's conception of folklore as foundation, where it "serves as a basis for making a point or creating an effect, but it is not concerned with perpetuating, explaining, or discussing folklore per se" (1971:116). It also could be considered a rather unique use of folklore as foundation in the pursuit of health and safety. Nevertheless, there remain folkloric origins of the concept of fairy dust which bear relevance to Barrie's characterization, and forthwith a relevance to a modern perception of sparkles as a visual language.

The folkloric origins of dust's association with fairies are testified to by John Rhys, where in Welsh fairy lore a man called William Ellis happened across a group of fairies who threw dust in his eyes when he approached them (1901:111). Chambers, in a footnote of the Scottish fairy story *Whuppity Stoorie,* theorized that the etymology of the name Whuppity

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Stoorie is linked to the popular belief that fairies appeared in road dust whirlwinds (1870:74). A similar concept of a fairy dust whirlwind which teleports a woman to the edge of a cliff is noted in the Cornish story *The Fairy Whirlwind* as recounted by Enys Tregarthen (1906:187) and J.A. MacCulloch (1921:229). There also existed the popular belief that people who have visited the realm of the fairies will crumble to dust once they set foot in the human world again (Franklin and Mason 1999:20-98; Rhys 1901:2-557) or when touched by a human (Rhys 1901:1-191).

Fairy dust converged with the visual imagery of sparkles during the twentieth century through the visual language of animation, predominantly in the works of Walt Disney Animation Studios in its purported Golden Age, during which sparkles featured regularly in the studio's animation techniques. The first Disney animated feature, *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs* (1937), uses the sparkle animation technique on the gems which the dwarfs mine during the "Heigh Ho!" musical sequence. Forthwith, the animation technique became closely associated with fairies and magic. Sparkles emanate from the Blue Fairy's dress and wand in *Pinocchio* (1940) to bring the boy puppet to life, and in *Fantasia* (1940) fairies cover plants and flowers with sparkling dew using their wands in "Dance of the Sugar Plum Fairy." In the dress transformation scene in *Cinderella*, the title character's rags transform into a ball gown in a shower of sparkles from the Fairy Godmother's wand, and in Disney's *Peter Pan,* Barrie's fairy dust is renamed pixie dust and glitters over the Darling children. Sparkles also fly from the wands of the three fairies in *Sleeping Beauty* (1959) when they perform magic.

Through Disney's encroaching cultural hegemony and an incorporation of magic into Walt Disney brand's identity, wherein this same pixie dust effect arches over the Disney castle in the Walt Disney Pictures ident, sparkles constitute a modern visual language of magic in popular culture not through folklore as foundation, but rather as a visual aside, used to create an effect (Denby 1971:118)—in this case one of magical wonder—and popularized in twentieth-century animation. They therefore constitute an imagery of magic in a modern visualization of the word, which is coherent with Bell's assertions of magic in modernity. A twentieth-century audience viewing folkloric characters producing these sparkles in popular mass media means that the signifier (the sparkles) transforms along with the progression of a visual understanding of magic.

There is a Baudrillardian element to this in that the imagery of sparkles in a mass media context form a hyper-resemblance of folklore—"the empty figure of resemblance, the empty form of representation" (Baudrillard 1994:45). Sparkles become a signifier of magic and wonder that extends beyond the original folklore that inspired it and takes on an aesthetically pleasing symbolism. They also bear relevance to what Denby articulates through the Jungian theory of a collective unconscious and demonstrate how "folklore is used as a foundation but in an extremely unconscious—or unintentional—manner" (1971:117). The constructed visual connotation of sparkles demonstrates a successful use of folklore as foundation in the pursuit of entertainment, and notably in the construction of a brand identity. Most importantly, though, the sparkles of Disney and Barrie also concretized their modern association with a magic of assistance; an arduous task made easy. Both points bear relevance

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to how sparkles have been implemented as a mean of promoting the "magic" of AI technology.

Promoting Technology as Magic

Arthur C. Clarke's Third Law that "any sufficiently advanced technology is indistinguishable from magic" (1973:21) bears much weight in how technology's functions are advertised to the general population. Using the magic-adjacent sparkles emoji specifically to promote generative AI as an assistance tool suggests that its simplification and streamlining of tasks is a miraculous feat. As Alfred Gell argues, humans have the technological capacity to find shortcuts for difficult tasks, and this has lent itself to how tasks or labor is characterized in magical folklore (1988:6).

In Northern European folklore, the performance of tasks by a magical being was often associated with the household, as with the brownie, hobgoblin, or Robin Goodfellow cleaning the home while the household slept (Briggs 1967:11), in exchange for milk or cream (Scot 1886:67; Sikes 1880:30). These figures of fairy lore, while helpful, performed their service in exchange for goods. Unless we count data scraping and the collection of personal information to streamline generative AI's efficiency and accuracy, there is no sense of it performing tasks as a folkloric hearth sprite might. Rather, it is more akin to Perrault's Fairy Godmother, and indeed to the Disney-fied Fairy Godmother, who is all-powerful and removes agency from those whom she helps (Jorgensen 2007:217), alleviating them of a required debt repayment.

Magical helpers are prominent in advertising and mass media through what Denby termed "folklure," where folklore is used in a decorative context or to sell goods (1971:115), particularly with advertising domestic items and household appliances. Victoria Louise Newton found in her analysis of 24 hours' worth of British television advertising that "Magical Helpers" were among the three most popular recurring folkloric motifs in advertising (2010:52). This is consistent with Vladimir Propp's concept of the magical agent. In Propp's characterization of magical agents and helpers, helpers are usually animals or humans, while agents are an inanimate object that appears to the folktale hero (1968:82). The association being particularly prescient with cleaning products, for example with a product such as Fairy Liquid, is, through folklore as folklure, a derivative of the hearth sprite or magical helper's purpose—to alleviate an arduous task. This is highly reminiscent of the purpose fulfilled by generative AI for its users: it can tidy, simplify, and create to save a human time and energy, and can do so instantaneously.

The folklure of technology providing magical assistance was used particularly shrewdly for promoting electricity. In terms of a rigorous promotional journey to ubiquity of usage, alongside fundamental changes to society and human interaction, the most recent revelatory technological advancement to compare with AI is electrical engineering. For the 1908 electricity exposition in Marseilles, French artist David Dellepiane depicted "The Electricity Fairy" in his Art Deco-style poster for the event (fig.ure 1) and for the Electricity Pavilion at the 1937 Paris World Fair, another French artist, Raoul Dufy, was commissioned to create a large mural called *La Fée électricité.*

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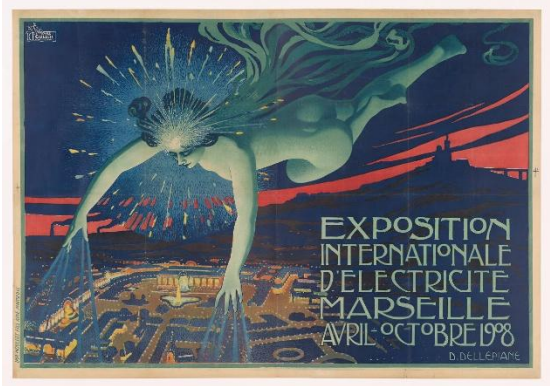


Figure 1. A promotional poster for the Marseille International Electricity Exposition 1908, depicting the Electricity Fairy lighting up Marseille with electricity. Illustration by David Dellepiane.

An interview by Thomas Edison with *Good Housekeeping* in 1912 entitled *The Woman of the Future* used a two-page illustration of electric light bulbs anthropomorphized as small, elf-like beings completing tasks for a woman using an electrical device (fig. 2 and 3).

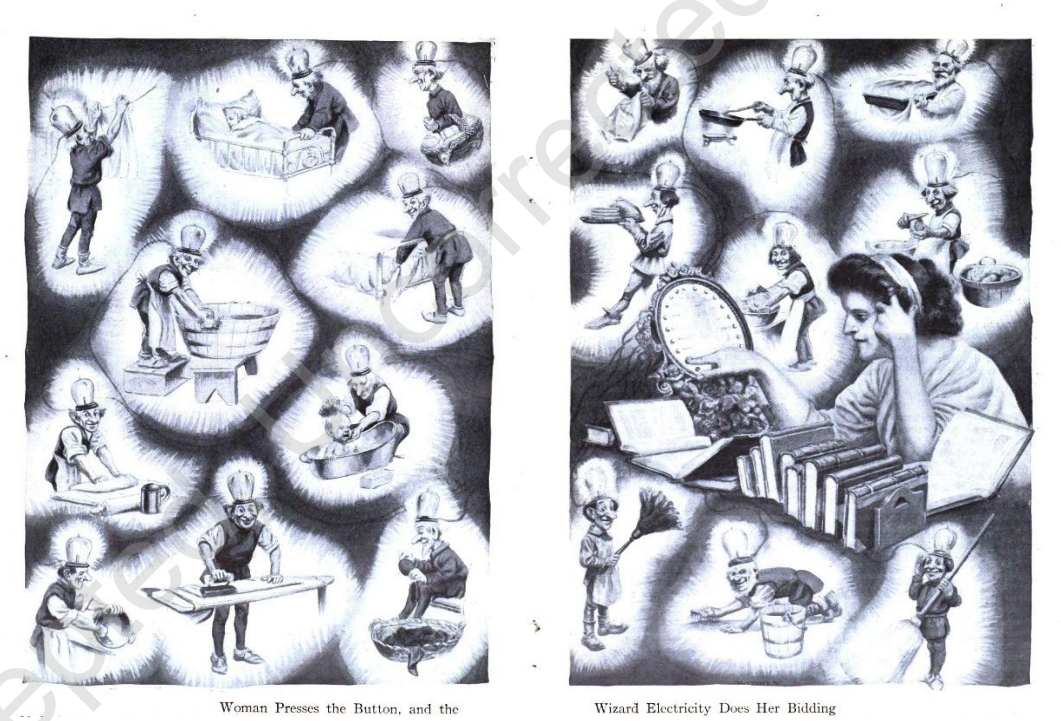


Figure 2-3. A two-page illustration from *Good Housekeeping* in 1912 entitled *The Woman of the Future,* depicting lightbulbs anthropomorphized as elves performing household tasks. Illustration by Rodney Thomson.

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The Electrical Age, a British journal published by the Electrical Association for Women that was specifically aimed at informing women about electricity, published a cartoon series entitled *The Fairy on the Hearth* in which a fairy with a glowing wand called Gertie Unit helps Auntie Amp and Grandpa Grid by taking them shopping for electrical items that will facilitate their day-to-day life. In these last four examples there is fascinating insight into how hearth fairies are used as folklure for a modernized idea of the hearth involving electricity, especially in how an association of women with the hearth popularized this mode of marketing in women's interest journals. It is a clear attempt to conjoin new technology with an older concept of the magical helper, but there is a perception of generative AI, even from within scientific academia, that it is not only the folklure of sparkles which grants generative AI a magical perception, but also its interior machine function.

AI as a Magical Helper

With generative AI being promoted as an assistant with digital tasks, and with this promotion appropriating the magical association of sparkles, it is framed as a magical helper, or magical agent, depending on whether it has been assigned personification. Academic work within science and technology studies, computer studies, and the social sciences demonstrates that the characterization of technology as magical remains relevant to human comprehension of artificial intelligence. Most forms of generative AI, particularly large language models (LLMs), operate through what is known in scientific terms as a black box, wherein the complexities of the machine's decision-making process, and how its results are generated, are unclear to the user beyond input and output of information (Tredinnick and Laybats 2023:100). The mysterious nature of this computing process has led to the black box being characterized as "magical," such as by Beth Wyckoff (1976) in her piece titled "The Magic Black Box" where she questioned the magical perception of a computing black box considering its potential inaccuracies. William A. Stahl argued in explicit terms that the computer's mystery contributes to a magical perception—that under Clarke's Third Law, "When technology is a 'black box,' it becomes magical" (1995:252).

Nevertheless, generative AI's perceived mystique in its inner functions can also be deceptive. In an opinion column for *AI and Society,* David Morris likens generative AI to illusionist magic, in that "Magicians hack our attentional, perceptual, and cognitive tendencies to make us perceive and believe what is not there. … To think AIs are intelligent is to be hacked by your experience of reading and writing as thinking and further lulled by marketing and the AI moniker" (2024:3047-8). Noel and Amanda Sharkey have also written on AI as a science of illusion, highlighting comparable historical examples of deceptive automation devices with hidden people inside, but that with AI, "The natural magic is about convincing people that they are dealing with a machine that understands them or that has feelings" (2007:12). Sharkey and Sharkey's comparison posits AI as a form of natural magic with illusionary qualities. The illusionary part of this natural magic is that AI takes on some human quality in its approach to fulfilling its task.

If generative AI's black box mystery can be, and has been, conceptualized as magic, then the black box is akin to illusionists' black top hats—when they tap a hat with a wand and

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produce a white rabbit, illusionists know how they produce the rabbit, even if their audience doesn't, creating the appearance of magic. AI users are, like the magician's audience, ensorcelled by its capacity, even if they don't understand it. Similarly, in the popular belief that hearth sprites would clean a house in exchange for offerings, the house's residents would think not of how the sprites went about the work but simply hoped it would be done while the household slept. The Fairy Godmother-esque magical helper performs miraculous magic with little outward contextualization of the process that nevertheless facilitates the hero's onward journey. There is a level of trust held in the actions of generative AI as a magical helper and the psychological construction of a miraculous process emboldened by the pleasing appeal of the sparkles emoji. The user is reassured of the AI assistant's compliance, but most importantly, the user is encouraged to believe what they are witnessing in the results of the AI's internal process is indeed a form of magic.

When one considers that magic, and magical beings, have historically been concepts to be feared as much as marveled at, this magical comparison of generative AI suggests that its enthusiastic users overlook its risks because of a perceived enchantment with its novelty. There is therefore reason to consider the process of generative AI and its effect on its users as a form of enchantment, manifest through the use of sparkles and the seemingly miraculous feats it achieves.

AI as Technological Enchantment

The ubiquity of the sparkles emoji's attachment to AI assistance across platforms, software, apps, and websites brings consistency of visual association. In this way, generative AI as a visual construct of the magical agent or helper also feels ubiquitous, a constant magical companion in the digital interface. One could argue that fairy lore and belief in a magical helper has been rendered redundant due to the enduring advance of technology. Yet Bell notes that there was no consensus amongst observers in the late nineteenth century that modern technology such as trains, steam engines, and electricity had led to a notable decline in superstition or belief in magical beings among the general population (2012:132-3). As Owen Davies astutely points out, "Modernity is not a synonym of rationality" (2012:99) but that "it is familiarity rather than scientific understanding that disenchants [technologies]" (2012:103).

Taking into consideration Clarke's Third Law, the prolonged usage of folklore in advertising through the twentieth and twenty-first centuries suggests that a historical association of fairy magic assisting domestic work and complicated tasks persists in the collective unconscious with the promotion of AI tools and in the accomplishments of those tools. This is why Newton also stresses the importance of enchantment in the use of folklore in advertising, which also bears relevance to the visual association of generative AI with the sparkles emoji. The magical association with the sparkles emoji as a means of promoting an AI assistant is, as Newton argues, "[reinforcing] that one can buy into a more exciting and magical existence" (2010:55) by using an AI assistance tool.

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In February 2026, an X user called Alex Maxham shared a screen recording of himself inputting a command for Galaxy AI to remove fog from a photo he took of San Francisco skyscrapers. An animation of the sparkles emoji then appears and rotates like a loading icon while phrases such as "Turning dreams into reality" appear onscreen.[2] The visual stimuli of the swirling sparkles, the narrative put forward by the AI technology and a seemingly miraculous transformation of the image via command input, all correspond to a sense of enchantment, of magic playing out before one's eyes. It is akin to Pinocchio being brought to life, or Cinderella's rags transforming into a gown. It is an example of what Linda Dégh identifies as "the plainest and most conspicuous commercial exploitation of magic … through demonstration rather than slogans" (1994:55). The sparkles are not advertising in the classic sense of the word, but they are exploiting a metaphor of magic to promote the supposed wonders of AI.

There has been some interesting academic work published on how AI serves as a means for enchantment or re-enchantment in daily digital life, such as by Mohammad Yaqub Chaudhary (2019) who draws from Max Weber's conception of disenchantment. It is necessary to consider Weber's ideas and their academic reassessment to properly assess the sparkly AI assistant's place in the modern world. Charles Taylor argues against Weber's idea that disenchantment diminishes religion's power, arguing instead that Enlightenment rationality based in science doesn't have so much of a diminishing effect on the belief in an Abrahamic God, but rather on a belief in magic and a world in which magic exists (2007:26). Chaudhary engages Taylor's observations of enchantment to argue that AI assistance operates in a manner similarly to the daemons in Philip Pullman's *His Dark Materials* novels (Scholastic), in "a world inhabited with extra-human agencies" (2019:469). This bears relevance to how the definition of a magical helper or magical agent is determined by its personification. If an AI tool with its sparkling heraldry is personified as an "assistant," this gives the AI what Patrick Curry terms a "*non-anthropocentric animism*" (2012:3, emphasis in original).

It is not just the use of sparkles, then, with their visual association of fairies and magic, but the process of AI-operated assistance tools which contribute to a form of digital enchantment. One person's "slop"—Merriam-Webster's 2025 Word of the Year—is another person's magic. Whether or not the use of AI tools has negative consequences in a social, cultural or environmental context does not negate its power to enchant its users, as can be shown in the way people use generative AI to construct fantastical scenarios, or even just to magic away the San Francisco fog. In this sense, the magicking of AI, emphasized by the sparkles emoji, goes beyond what was attempted with the use of folklure in advertising electricity, where the magic was in its functionality. While both contribute to an effort to normalize technological innovation, the continuation of promotional folkloric elements in the age of AI evokes a capacity for wondrous creation. This is testament to a continued subconscious adherence to magic and wonder, even in modernity.

Conclusion

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There are demonstrable historical and contemporary sources that highlight how technology and magical helpers are closely linked in the human imagination. The modern visual culture of sparkles attests to a subconscious symbology of magic which informs the ongoing popularity of AI assistance in their cultural association with magical aid and magical helpers. Taking into consideration the historical implementation of folklure in the promotion of technology, and folkloristic analysis of magical helpers and hearth sprites, the sparkles can assuredly be considered a renewed method of using folklore to normalize the inexplicable capabilities of new technology. Not only this, but generative AI's mysterious inner workings also contribute to a magical perception that exists beyond the folklure of marketing. Where there is concern, however, is how such an appealingly magical symbol as the sparkles emoji can belie the ethical risks of generative AI. Where previously popular belief encouraged caution towards magical beings, an associative quality of magic with generative AI's function obfuscates the balance of caution and respect that historically formed a consideration of magic.

It is tempting to view re-enchantment in the modern world as inherently positive, but just as with those who mistrusted and feared the convenience of electricity's innovation, a mistrust of the magical AI assistance is not necessarily irrational. The levels of trust in generative AI and its associative "magic" qualities by nonexpert users lacks the necessary caution that many scientists and experts have called for. Generative AI and LLMs have been known to hallucinate, create misinformation and, within the context of the military industrial complex, its errors can have devastating and even fatal consequences. When control is taken out of the creators' hands, the sparkly AI assistant becomes less of a helpful Fairy Godmother and more akin to the out-of-control magicked broomstick of Goethe's Sorcerer's Apprentice (1859).

Generative AI remains highly controversial in how its widespread output is affecting cognition and visual comprehension. It would be pertinent to continue assessing its output and its cultural effect in a folkloristic capacity, to gain further insight into how contemporary interpretations of folklore bear relevance to the ongoing promotion of technological innovation.

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< Captions and Alt Text >

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Figure 1. A promotional poster for the Marseille International Electricity Exposition 1908, depicting the Electricity Fairy lighting up Marseille with electricity. Illustration by David Dellepiane.

Figure 1 alt text: A woman hovers over Marseille, light beams emanating from her fingertips, with lettering that reads “Exposition Internationale d’Electricite Marseille Avril-October 1908 David Dellepiane.”

Figure 2-3. A two-page illustration from *Good Housekeeping* in 1912 entitled *The Woman of the Future,* depicting lightbulbs anthropomorphized as elves performing household tasks. Illustration by Rodney Thomson.

Figure 2-3 alt text: Two side-by-side cartoons show smiling cartoon lightbulb creatures performing household tasks, while a woman operates an electric device, with lettering across the two images that reads “Woman Presses the Button, and the Wizard Electricity Does Her Bidding.”

Notes

[1] Oxford English Dictionary, “fairy dust,” accessed February 6, 2026. Access the entry at https://www.oed.com/dictionary/fairy-dust_n?tl=true.

[2]Alex Maxham (@alexmaxham). 2026. It’s foggy in San Francisco, but Galaxy AI can handle it! #GalaxyS26Ultra. X, February 26. The post can be found at https://x.com/alexmaxham/status/2027077275246878889

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