

**THE FAIRY
MYTHOLOGY OF
SHAKESPEARE**

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The fairy mythology of Shakespeare by Alfred Trübner Nutt

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THE FAIRY MYTHOLOGY OF SHAKESPEARE

Few things are more marvellous in the marvellous English poetic literature of the last three centuries than the persistence of the fairy note throughout the whole of its evolution. As we pass on from Shakespeare and his immediate followers to Herrick and Milton, through the last ballad writers to Thomson and Gray, and then note in Percy and Chatterton the beginnings of the romantic revival which culminated in Keats and Coleridge, was continued by Tennyson, the Rossettis, and Mr. Swinburne, until in our own days it has received a fresh accession of life alike from Ireland and from Gaelic Scotland, we are never for long without hearing the horns of Elfland faintly winding, never for long are we denied access to

"Charmed magic casements opening on the foam
Of perilous seas in faery lands forlorn."

We could not blot out from English poetry its visions of the fairyland without a sense of

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irreparable loss. No other literature save that of Greece alone can vie with ours in its pictures of the land of phantasy and glamour, or has brought back from that mysterious realm of unfading beauty treasures of more exquisite and enduring charm.

There is no phenomenon without a cause; but in the immense complexity of historical record it is not always easy to detect the true cause, and to trace its growth and working until the result delight us. Why does the fairy note ring so perfectly throughout that literature of modern England which has its roots in and which derives the best of its life's blood from the wonderful half-century: 1580-1630? Reasons, causes must exist, nor—let me here forestall a possible objection—do we wrong genius by seeking to discover them. Rather, I hope, may individual genius, however pre-eminent, acquire fresh claims to our love and gratitude when we note that it is no arbitrary and isolated phenomenon, but stands in necessary relation to the totality of causes and circumstances which have shaped the national character. And, should we find these causes and circumstances still potent for influence, may we not look forward with better confidence to the future of our poetic literature?

Early in the half-century of which I have just spoken, some time between 1590 and 1595, appeared

the *Midsummer Night's Dream*, the crown and glory of English delineation of the fairy world. Scarce any one of Shakespeare's plays has had a literary influence so immediate, so widespread, and so enduring. As pictured by Shakespeare, the fairy realm became, almost at once, a convention of literature in which numberless poets sought inspiration and material. I need only mention Drayton, Ben Jonson, Herrick, Randolph, and Milton himself. Apart from any question of its relation to popular belief, of any grounding in popular fancy, Shakespeare's vision stood by itself, and was accepted as the ideal presentment of fairydom which, for two centuries at least, has signified to the average Englishman of culture the world depicted in the *Midsummer Night's Dream*. To this day, works are being produced deriving form and circumstance and inspiration (such as it is) wholly from Shakespeare.

Now if we compare these literary presentations of Faery, based upon Shakespeare, with living folklore, where the latter has retained the fairy belief with any distinctness, we find almost complete disagreement; and if, here and there, a trait seems common, it is either of so general a character as to yield no assured warrant of kinship, or there is reason to suspect contamination of the popular form by the literary ideal derived from and built up out of Shakespeare.

Yet if we turn back to the originator of literary fairyland, to the poet of the *Midsommer Night's Dream*, we can detect in *his* picture all the essentials of the fairy creed as it has appealed, and still appeals, to the faith and fancy of generations more countless than ever acknowledged the sway of any of the great world-religions, we can recover from it the elements of a conception of life and nature older than the most ancient recorded utterance of earth's most ancient races.

Whence, then, did Shakespeare draw his account of the fairy world? As modern commentators have pointed out, from at least two sources: the folk-belief of his day and the romance literature of the previous four centuries. This or that trait has been referred to one or the other source; the differences between these two have been dwelt upon, and there, as a rule, the discussion has been allowed to rest. What I shall essay to prove is that in reality sixteenth-century folk-belief and mediæval fairy romance have their ultimate origin in one and the same set of beliefs and rites; that the differences between them are due to historical and psychological causes, the working of which we can trace; that their reunion, after ages of separation, in the England of the late sixteenth century, is due to the continued working of those same causes; and that, as a result of this reunion, which took

place in England because in England alone it could take place, English poetry became free of Fairydom, and has thus been enabled to preserve for the modern world a source of joy and beauty which must otherwise have perished.

I observed just now that the modern literary presentation of Faery (which is almost wholly dependent upon Shakespeare) differed essentially from the popular one still living in various districts of Europe, nowhere, perhaps, more tenaciously than in some of the Celtic-speaking portions of these isles. I may here note, according to the latest, and in this respect the best, editor of the *Midsummer Night's Dream*, Mr. Chambers, what are the characteristics of the Shakespearian fairies. He ranges them as follows:—

- (a) They form a community under a king and queen.
- (b) They are exceedingly small.
- (c) They move with extreme swiftness.
- (d) They are elemental *airy* spirits; their brawls incense the wind and moon, and cause tempests; they take a share in the life of nature; live on fruit; deck the cowslips with dewdrops; war with noxious insects and reptiles; overcast the sky with fog, &c.
- (e) They dance in orbs upon the green.
- (f) They sing hymns and carols to the moon.
- (g) They are invisible and ap-

parently immortal. (*h*) They come forth mainly at night. (*i*) They fall in love with mortals. (*j*) They steal babies and leave changelings. (*k*) They come to bless the best bride-bed and make the increase thereof fortunate.

This order of characteristics is, I make little doubt, what would occur to most well-read Englishmen, and denotes what impressed the fancy of Shakespeare's contemporaries and of the after-world. The fairy community, with its quaintly fantastic parody of human circumstance; the minute size and extreme swiftness of the fairies, which insensibly assimilate them in our mind to the winged insect world—these traits would strike us at first blush, and these have been insisted upon and developed by the imitators of Shakespeare; only on second thoughts should we note their share in the life of nature, should we recall their sway over its benign and malign manifestations, and this side of fairy activity is wholly ignored by later fairy literature.

Yet a moment's reflection will convince us that the characteristics upon which Shakespeare seems to lay most stress, which have influenced later poets and story-tellers, and to which his latest editor assigns the first place, are only secondary, and can in no way explain either

how the fairy belief arose nor what was its real hold upon popular imagination. The peasant stooping over his spade, toilsomly winning his bread from Mother Earth, was scarce so enamoured with the little he knew of kings and queens that he must feign the existence of an invisible realm; nor would the contrast, which touches alike our fantasy and our sense of the ludicrous, between minute size and superhuman power appeal to him. The peasant had far other cause to fear and reverence the fairy world. In his daily struggle with nature he could count upon fairy aid if he performed with due ceremony the ancient ritual handed down to him by his forefathers; but woe betide him if, through carelessness or sluttish neglect of these rites, he aroused fairy wrath—not help, but hindrance and punishment would be his lot. And if neglect was hateful to these mysterious powers of nature, still more so was prying interference—they work as they list, and when man essays to change and, in his own conceit, to better the old order, the fairy vanishes. All this the peasant knows; it is part of that antique religion of the soil which means so much more to him than our religions do to us, because upon it, as he conceives, depend his and his children's sustenance. But be he as attentive as he may to the rites by which the fairy world may be placated and with which it