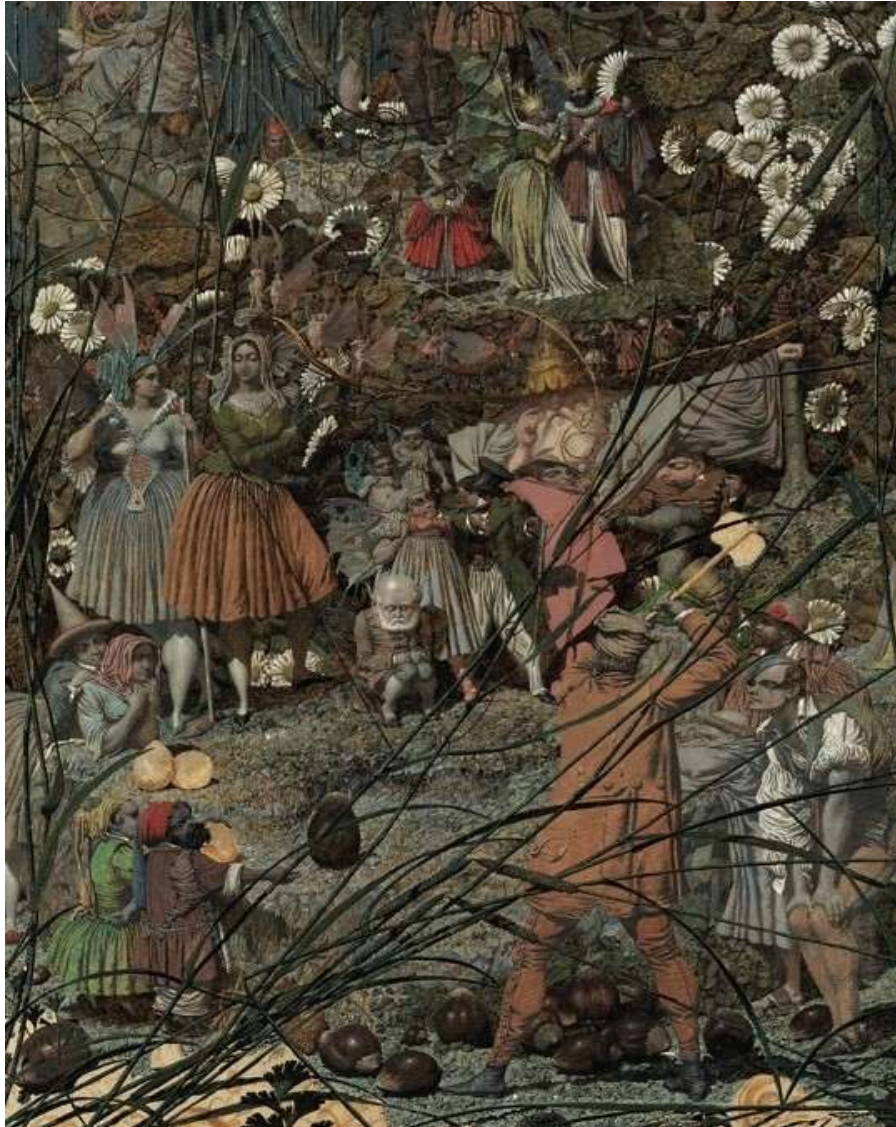


**Catriona Mary Dickson PhD**

**Uncovering The Secret Commonwealth: the Socio-Cultural Significance and Influence of  
Fairy Belief and Modern Fairy Encounters in Twenty-First Century England.**



This thesis is submitted for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy in Religious Studies

Lancaster University

Department of Politics, Philosophy and Religion

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Picture credit:

Richard Dadd, The Fairy Feller's Masterstroke, 1855-1864, Tate Gallery, London, UK.

## **Abstract**

Fairies and fairy-like beings have been a part of the folklore of the British Isles for as long as written records have existed. What are they and how do they affect the culture of the nation of England? This thesis traces the history and folklore of fairies and fairy belief and examines accounts of encounters recorded by people who claim to have seen or otherwise experienced fairies in the 'real' world. It forms a picture both of what fairies are like and what the people who experience them are like. It then goes on to analyse three main areas of English culture that are important to people today: nostalgia, enchantment and spirituality and how fairies have affected and continue to affect these areas. In terms of nostalgia, fairies create idyllic representations of the past that help people to endure the mundane and at times frightening aspects of the present. By using enchantment, including glamours, costumes, lights and magic, fairies enhance the ordinary, everyday environment of people, often for the purpose of tricking them or gaining help. In modern day spirituality, where established religions are declining in number and belief, New Age belief systems are filling up the gaps. Most recently, a fairy spirituality has developed, largely in the footprint of Wicca, wellbeing and oracular card readings, where fairies are elevated to the position of wise folk, ready and willing to give advice and comfort to human querants.

## Acknowledgements

I would like to thank the many organisations and individuals of the fairy community, who have helped and supported me during the five years of researching and writing this thesis:

The Fairy Investigation Society and the members of the corresponding Facebook Groups, and its leader, Simon Young without whose data collection, myriad writings on fairies, expertise and support, this thesis would not exist, Chris Woodyard for her mellifluous voice on the *Boggart and Banshee* podcast, her extensive knowledge and research, Jo Hickey Hall, her blog *Scarlett of the Fae*, and her podcast *Modern Fairy Sightings*, Claire Casely and her podcast *Fairy Whispering*, Karen Kay and her eponymous website, and book *Fairy Whispering 111*, Kate Ray for her talks, expertise and fairy toadstool earrings.

I would also like to thank the academic community of Lancaster University: Linda Woodhead for getting me started with her lecture and paper on *The Gods of Spirituality*, and for supervising my first year of the PhD, Chris Partridge for also being my supervisor, and for taking me on singlehandedly after Linda left. Chris has been unstinting in his support, critical advice, kindness and empathy throughout the five years of my research, and beyond. He is a perspicacious tutor and has never let me get away with sloppiness but has also delivered his advice with kindness and positivity, Jean Dsouza, critical friend, colleague and office mate, who gave me moral support during some difficult personal events and never let me down, Shuruq Naguib who supervised me temporarily, the Cohort of PhD students at Lancaster who were always interested in what I was researching. Karen Bingham, a calm, knowledgeable and supportive administrator, and my panellists Nick Unwin and Amalendu Misra, who helped me clarify the purpose of my thesis and become a more critical and analytical writer.

Finally, I would like to thank my friends for their moral support, for reading my chapters and commenting on them, for showing an interest and for encouraging me to write: Elizabeth Nutter

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My youngest son Charlie for sharing his own learning, especially for introducing me to Bashar.

And last but not least, the fairies. I did not mean to offend.

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**For Simon, Emily and Charlie**



## Methodology and Literature Review

A satisfactory theory of ferlies<sup>1</sup> and their effect is, I believe, still to seek. I suspect it will not succeed unless it fulfils two conditions. In the first place, it will have to be sure that it has exhausted the possibilities of purely literary diagnosis before it looks further afield.... The second condition...is that the theory should deeply study the ferlies as things (in a sense) in the real world.

C.S. Lewis<sup>2</sup>

The data I have examined come from several sources: *The Fairy Census Volume I and II* by the Fairy Investigation society, *Fairies: Real Encounters with Little People* by Janet Bord, *Seeing Fairies* by Marjorie Johnson, *Magical Folk*, by Ceri Houlbrook and Simon Young (eds.), *Real Fairies* by David Tame, and *Faery Tale* by Signe Pike. The encounters collected in these works go back to the early twentieth century, covering the past one hundred years.

The Fairy Investigation Society (FIS) website<sup>3</sup> is a detailed and varied resource curated over several years by Dr Simon Young, a prolific and knowledgeable researcher into fairies and fairy-like beings, who has revived the original Fairy Investigation Society which was set up in the early twentieth century by Walter Evans-Wentz, folklorist and theosophist.<sup>4</sup> The FIS provided a bibliography of many writers and researchers of general and specific fairy writings. The most important resource is the *Fairy Census*, a collection of actual fairy encounters recorded from 2014 covering the UK and Europe, USA, Canada, Australia and New Zealand, and going back to the early twentieth century. The data was collected in the form of a survey that people could freely contribute to, in as much or as little detail as required. So far, Young has published two

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<sup>1</sup> Lewis' name for 'marvels', including fairies, R. F. Green, *Elf Queens and Holy Friars: Fairy Beliefs and the Medieval Church*, Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2016, p. 11

<sup>2</sup> Ibid. p.11

<sup>3</sup> <https://www.fairyist.com/fairy-investigation-society/>

<sup>4</sup> Winkler, Ken (2013). *Pilgrim of the Clear Light: The Biography of Dr. Walter Y. Evans-Wentz*, Second Edition, p.xv-xvi



datasets, from 2014 – 2017 and 2017 – 2024, of over one thousand accounts worldwide.<sup>5</sup> As well as quantative data, there is space to describe the encounter in the participants' own words. There is also the possibility for third person accounts.<sup>6</sup> Young also explains his methodology of editing and classifying the encounters.<sup>7</sup> Young's survey is quite detailed, and when he started it, gender perhaps, including trans and non-binary categories were not talked about as much as they are now. I felt that the differences between male and female experiences might not yield much new information either, however, there were some factors that seemed to contradict common expectations: the fact that men were seeing fairies and weren't afraid to talk about their experiences, and that women were seeing more male entities than female, were two notable findings. There was little attention paid to ethnicities either, in the English data, as first of all the ethnicity of the participant was not asked for, and the ethnicity of the fairy like creature was very difficult to quantify, as many had non-human skin colour and features, wherein ethnicity is often identified. Within the nation of England of course there are regional variations, and these were specified according to county of origin. Where possible I have noted where certain fairy types conform to their respective regional origin, according to the folklore of that region, where documented, but most people did not give a specific regional name for the entity. The most named were brownies, bucka-du (from Cornwall) and then fairies, gnomes and pixies, which are more generic. And most of these were so named according to the knowledge and background of the participants. Simon Young published his survey on the online FIS site and advertised it in *Haunted Magazine* and other such publications and websites. Anyone can access it, but it would be people interested in such creatures, or the esoteric in general who might look for it, rather than random internet surfers. Of course, accidents can happen. My scope was limited to the English region of accounts; one hundred and forty accounts from volume i and one hundred and twenty-two

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<sup>5</sup> S. Young, *Fairy Census* volume 1 and 2, Pwca Books, 2017, p.7, and 2024, p.5

<sup>6</sup> A link to the Fairy Census questionnaire can be found here: <https://www.fairyist.com/survey/>

<sup>7</sup> S. Young, op. cit., volume 1, p. 9-18

from volume ii. I also include accounts from *Magical Folk*, edited by Ceri Houlbrook and Simon Young, which looks at the regional variations of fairy sightings and folklore in more detail. I have also included extracts from *Fairies: Real Encounters of Little People*, by Janet Bord. Most of Janet Bord's information comes from archived newspaper accounts, library collections, friends and fellow researchers.<sup>8</sup> *Seeing Fairies* by Marjorie Johnson, who was the secretary of the original Fairy Investigation Society, whose collection of encounters consisting mostly of letters from members of the society received during the twentieth century, was published by Simon Young in 2014. Johnson died in 2010. I also include encounters found in Signe Pike's *Faery Tale*, who conducted her own fairy research in England and documents her sightings, and David Tame's *Real Fairies*, though some of his collected encounters were duplicates of some of the encounters in Bord and Johnson. I also included accounts sent to me on request after posting my interest to relevant Facebook groups. Some were specific to fairies, but some were more of a general nature of vague supernatural happenings. My classifications of all the encounters from England are in the appendix.<sup>9</sup>

The largest bias of all these accounts is probably the fact that most of the participants were and are believers to a greater or lesser extent, in some form of 'otherworld.' Some might even be pranksters, making up stories to tease the researchers. Young says he did try to use his common sense with some of the stories, and that he also weeded out those that he recognise as known fairy tales, but what he allowed to be included were what seemed to him to be just too strange to be made up.<sup>10</sup> However, real or not, made up, or not, these accounts are interesting because they all shine a light on the nature of belief, on the influence of supernatural belief upon history and culture, especially the belief in fairies, and the persistence and endurance of such experiences for humans over many centuries.

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<sup>8</sup> J. Bord, *Fairies, Real Encounters with Little People*, op. cit., p. 1-19

<sup>9</sup> Appendix

<sup>10</sup> S. Young, *The Fairy Census*, volume 1, p.13

In order to organise the different encounters for my own analysis in chapters three and four, where most of the encounters are analysed, I created a broad taxonomy of the fairies and fairy-like beings:

- i) Invisible, barely or rarely seen.
- ii) Lights.
- iii) Human sized, male and female, regal.
- iv) Little and male, no wings.
- v) Little and female with wings.

There were also a few encounters that did not fit comfortably into these categories, and I have dealt with them separately. In chapter three, analysing the data of the kinds of people who see fairies, I quantified them into gender, age at the time of the sighting, decade of the sighting, location, company, time of day, duration of encounter, frequency of encounters (if applicable), effect on the environment, Covid-19 period. From these classifications, I was able to draw conclusions about the kinds of people who see fairies, according to my own perceptions and biases. My aim was to keep an open mind and not to judge, but to take at face value the accounts with which I was presented. I was also able to track commonalities of experience; while each encounter was clearly unique to the participant, there is clear evidence to show that many have had similar experiences.

In chapter four, my taxonomy of five main types of fairies helped to quantify what was being seen, which category was most prolific (the mostly male little men from these examples), and which the rarest (human sized and regal).

In Part Two of the thesis, I dealt with culture, and found myself at first, thinking about all the areas of popular culture in which fairies might feature. As a thematic device, fairies are used for

decoration, toys, soft furnishings, costumes, jewellery, etc., all largely superficial and visual. These types of usage are little different from many other types of creatures: woodland, insects, flowers, etc., and so did not really explain the specific significance and impact of fairies. So, I thought of areas of culture most famously the remit of fairies and fairy belief, and concluded that over and above their decorative nature, fairies are considerably influential in the areas of nostalgia, enchantment and spirituality. Within each of these areas there are the themes to be found of art, literature, music, theatre, the decorative elements and the entertainment elements. There is a great deal of scholarship written on these three topics, for example, Svetlana Bohm, Agatha Arnold Foster on nostalgia, Helena De Cruz, Patrick Curry and Charles Taylor on Enchantment, and many more both academic and popular on Fairy Spirituality, Karen Kay from the popular fairy practitioner world, Sabrina Magliocco from the academic world. How the fairies play their part can be examined with the backdrop of those academic writings. I wanted to give fairies a specific position within these cultural fields, and to highlight their importance within them.

Fairy Spirituality is a relatively new phenomenon in the long history of fairy belief, and this is propagated by people whom I have called 'fairy practitioners.' But the existence of wise men and women who commune with the fairies is not new. There are fairy doctors reported in the nineteenth century, and cunning folk who had fairy familiars from the Early Modern period. Several people are notable in the twenty-first century as having specific expertise in the realm of fairy belief and use that expertise to mediate between fairies and humans. Fairy spirituality has become, in some circles, a ritualistic practice, similar in many ways to Wicca, with altars, circles, consultations. I have included a case study of three of the most prolific fairy practitioners working in this area today. These three, Karen Kay, Claire Casely and Jo Hickey Hall, have a large online presence, and among others are very much pushing this fairy spirituality within the New Age community. I have given them and the history of these kinds of

practitioners, their own chapter, as I see this practice as a new turning in the history and folklore of fairies and fairy-like beings. I have used the information they give about themselves on their websites, information that is freely available and provided by them for public consumption. So, any conclusions I have drawn about them are based on that evidence.

I also conducted some cursory ethnography within the fairy spirituality field. As is documented at the start of this chapter, I participated in a *Cha-Dao* meditation and creative visualisation online. I also visited the *East Sussex Fairy Festival* near Eastbourne. Finally, I attended one of Karen Kay's fairy markets and fairy balls, held in the town hall in Glastonbury, Somerset. I go into more detail about my experiences at the fairy market and ball in chapter eight. My approach to these two festivals bears some resemblance to what Birgitta Schmidt-Lauber calls 'European Ethnology.'<sup>11</sup> This methodology has deep roots in German anthropology which she explains in her paper.<sup>12</sup> Historically, she maintains, it characterised as, 'often romantically tinged German philological perspective on specific genres and literary traditions, such as folktales, legends, and folksongs, and a statistical-statist social science perspective in "the land and the people."<sup>13</sup> This particular methodology lends itself very well to methods in fieldwork, in folklore studies, and for my own research into fairy belief and fairy spirituality, given its history. Participant observation is the closest perhaps a researcher can come to having the experiences that the participants they are studying are having. As Schmidt-Lauber says,

Fieldwork is then an experience-based means to access social life and cultural events with the goal of developing an understanding of and insights into everyday life and social dynamics. It is a close, microanalytical research practice that acquires its specific form and direction in the course of the research process and in constant negotiation with the relevant actors. Fieldwork is also a special form of interaction and a particular mode of

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<sup>11</sup> B. Schmidt-Lauber, *Seeing, Hearing, Feeling, Writing: approaches and Methods from the Perspective of Ethnological Analysis of the Present*, in Bendix and Hasan-Rokem, *A Companion to Folklore*, Wiley-Blackmore, 2014, pp.772 – 797

<sup>12</sup> Ibid., p.772

<sup>13</sup> Ibid., p.773

experience. The strong interweaving of the method with the person of the researcher and their subjective experiences and impressions entails that other senses beyond those of the eye (seeing what is done) and ear (hearing what is said) have increasingly and consciously been applied as media of perception (Bendix 2006).<sup>14</sup>

The practice of participant observation yields insights into some of the many and varied fairy spirituality practices available today. With regards to the fairy tea ceremony, I decided it would be beneficial to take part in the whole process and not just sit back and listen to the Shaman leading the ceremony, and the experiences of other participants. As I have recounted, I was rewarded with a vivid and detailed fairy encounter which I shared with the group (there were about eight other participants, including the host, Jo Hickey-Hall, who also participated and shared her own experience). In that interaction with fairy believers and practitioners, I entered into this fully sensory experience which Schmidt-Lauber emphasises is a fundamental part of European ethnology.<sup>15</sup> It also allowed me to be accepted by the other participants, all of whom were aligned to the practice of fairy or another New Age spirituality. However, the East Sussex Fairy Festival yielded very little in terms of data and therefore, is only mentioned briefly in Chapter 8, as an example of crossover from Wicca. I went as a participant, though beforehand I did notify the organisers of my research and my role. I was dressed like most of the non-cosplaying people, in jeans and a decorative top. I made notes on my observations, had some conversation with stall holders, who had nothing much to say about fairies but had clearly been chosen by the organisers because of their vague New Age connotations: herbal teas and ethnic clothing. Much more effort had gone into the Glastonbury Fairy Market (which was free to enter and free to participate in the four scheduled talks) and the Fairy Ball, which was ticket only and cost twenty-five pounds. I had the opportunity to speak to some of the participants who were mostly believers and practitioners of fairy spirituality. These conversations were informal but arose naturally as I was alone and people were friendly. There was little structure to my own

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<sup>14</sup> Ibid., p. 778

<sup>15</sup> Ibid., p.778

ethnography, but it did seem to fall in with the descriptions of some aspects of ‘European Ethnology’ that Schmidt-Lauber details:

The researcher becomes part of the method and is physically present. He or she enters into close contact with the people and milieus that are being studied and engages in the process of understanding and comprehending the (often very disparate) views internal to the field.<sup>16</sup>

I gained very little insight into the nature of fairy spirituality at this fairy ball, apart from how the people got together and interacted. There were no rituals, no discussions, just fairy-themed cocktails and a Celtic rock band. But I could observe these interactions because I looked the part (I bought a dress from one of the hippy clothing stalls at the market) and because I was friendly and open to chatting to people. The Tea Ceremony yielded more, both personally, and also in showing what particular spiritual exercises are being practiced. I didn’t have to go undercover; I was known by the host as a fairy researcher and trusted not to be engaging in negative or hostile research. At the East Sussex festival, the Glastonbury market and ball, I was a punter and to some extent invisible, however, punters are also outside of what is going on, making it more difficult to get more profound insights into the field. Schmidt-Lauber makes the point that it is important to get as close as possible, but to draw the line at ‘go[ing] native.’ ‘At the core of fieldwork’ she states, ‘is the presence at and participation in events on the part of the researcher – the participant observation, by means of which “feeling” and empathy for the research field or issue should be achieved (see Hauser-Schaublin, 2003).’<sup>17</sup> In the end the researcher is always on the outside, unless, as Kate Kingbury asserts, one becomes more than just a participant.<sup>18</sup> Overall, these three short ethnographic excursions showed the effectiveness of participant observation, and also its limitations. And perhaps it is

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<sup>16</sup> Ibid., p. 773

<sup>17</sup> Ibid., p.775

<sup>18</sup> K. Kingsbury, op. cit.

understandable; the festival, market and ball were designed for social interaction, and the tea ceremony for a more formal and intimate connection with fairy spirituality.

## **Ethics**

In collecting the data on fairy encounters I had several sources, not all of them requiring ethical consideration. The researchers who collected and published this data had already done their own ethical reviews. I informed the author of the *Fairy Census* that I was using his data, and he kindly sent me new data that had not yet been published.

Facebook groups and pages linked to some of the fairy folklore websites and podcasts, were another source I used frequently (see Bibliography). I am already active on Facebook, Twitter (now X), Instagram, and latterly, Blue Sky. On all of these sites I appear as myself and anyone who friends or follows me on them has the same access as my personal friends and family. I always let the leaders of organisations, publications etc., know who I was and what I was researching.

The honesty with which I appeared online meant that the practitioners, researchers and participants could deal with me authentically. And in many cases, I have built up a solid reputation of trust with regulars in these groups. I was careful always to offer anonymity to anyone who wanted to share experiences, ideas or opinions and I always asked the permission of the admins of any group or page if I could make posts relevant to my research.

For my participation in the East Sussex Fairy Festival, I let the organisers know that I was coming and what I planned to do, which they were happy about. On the tea ceremony call I was already known to the host and trusted by her. I let the organisers of the Glastonbury fairy event



know that I would be attending the market, talks and ball and again, no objections were raised. Lancaster University Ethics Committee supported and approved my ethics application.

In summation, I wanted people to feel they were dealing with a genuine researcher who was interested in them, in their practices and beliefs, and to offer everything within my power to allow them to share their stories with me safely. Over time, I have become friends with some fairy practitioners and researchers, so I have been very careful to only write about information that is accessible by the general public, from their websites or publications and nothing that arose from private conversations. If people feel confident that they are taken seriously, they will share valuable insights and experiences. I have mentioned everyone who helped me in my acknowledgements.

## **Literature Review**

The extant scholarship in this area of fairy belief, tends to come from the study of folklore in specific historical periods. For example, Francis Young's *Twilight of the Godlings*, which defines medieval fairies as a 'composite cultural creation whose origins are found in a synthesis of British (that is Breton, Welsh and Cornish) and English popular culture that occurred in the aftermath of the Norman Conquest.'<sup>19</sup> Young recognises the identity of fairies still claiming the moniker 'elf' to define them in this period and how it is so resilient, but that 'the fairies of medieval Britain are best viewed, not as a singular class of beings, but as a raging alliance of supernatural beings from various sources – not unlike the chaotic jumble of grotesque forms in the fairy illustrations of Arthur Rackham or Brian Froud.'<sup>20</sup> Young reaches the conclusion on fairies and what/who they are, that 'while the fairies of romance were clearly inspired in some way by folklore, there is no reliable way to trace the ultimate origins of literary fairies or

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<sup>19</sup> F. Young, *Twilight of the Godlings*, Cambridge University Press, 2023, p.302 - 3

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 303

establish their relationship with widespread popular belief.<sup>21</sup> Emma Wilby's *Cunning folk and familiar spirits* which, amongst other things, looks at the relationship between fairy beliefs and witchcraft beliefs. Diane Purkiss's *Troublesome Things* is perhaps the most cited work in this thesis as she helpfully casts a sweep across the history of fairy belief and has several theories about the impact of fairy belief on culture. Carol G. Silver in *Strange and Secret Peoples* writes about the Victorian influence on fairy belief (and vice versa). There has been extensive research and analysis of spiritual encounters in Religious Studies, most notably by Alistair Hardy, David Hay and Kate Hunt. Hardy established the Religious Experience Research Unit in Oxford in 1969, which is now at Lampeter as the Alistair Hardy Religious Experience Research Centre and contains thousands of accounts of religious and spiritual experiences. There is extensive research on and interest in paranormal encounters such as ghosts and poltergeists, alien encounters and other similar strange phenomena, there are anthropological and ethnographical studies of spirituality and folklore belief, but surprisingly little modern scholarship looks specifically at fairies as the central figures, or indeed at personal encounters and the meanings they create and represent, particularly as they are continuing to happen in the twenty-first century. In general, most studies are largely historical, and contemporary accounts are unreliable, like witch trial confessions, probably extracted under duress, and even in Robert Kirk's account, *The Secret Commonwealth of Elves, Fauns and Fairies, of 1691*, rather fanciful. I go into more detail of the literature on the subjects of belief and spirituality in later chapters.

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<sup>21</sup> Ibid., p.304

## Introduction

The first task is not to establish what such ferlies represent, or exemplify or epitomise, but rather to ask what they are and what cultural work they are doing.

Richard Firth Green<sup>22</sup>

I am sitting at the desk in my study, in front of a Zoom seminar hosted by fairy researcher Jo Hickey-Hall<sup>23</sup> and run by Todd Grube, a yoga practitioner and fairy tea expert.<sup>24</sup> The purpose of the seminar is to contact the fairy realm via a tea meditation; we have all brought our own tea. It works with any kind, but Oolong is recommended. My tea is called 'Water Sprite Oolong' which I thought appropriate. Jo Introduces Todd who explains the origin of the ceremony:

'Tea meditation or Cha-dao is an ancient form of Shamanic meditation practice from south China which uses the plant medicine, *Camellia Sinensis*, or tea! It has been used by shamans, healers and Taoists for around twenty thousand years as a tool to communicate with gods, Fae, elementals, guides, Star people and power animals. Tea is a plant teacher and medicine which helps open you to receive messages and even communicate with different Fae and light beings. Todd will talk about the history of tea, how to do a tea meditation, which teas to use for tea meditations, philosophy of tea meditation, how to use tea as a medicine and to connect with the Fae and light beings. We will run a ritual ceremony during the workshop followed by an opportunity to share our experiences and ask questions. The whole workshop will be one and a half hours.'<sup>25</sup>

After Todd has explained the history of the relationship between fairies and tea, he leads us through a guided meditation, which involves inhaling the odour of the tea, then drinking our tea mindfully, until we are in a meditative state. After that, we are on our own, all of us hopefully connecting with the fairies who will reveal themselves to us via the tea connection. This was the

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<sup>22</sup> Ibid. p. 12

<sup>23</sup> J. Hickey-Hall, <https://www.scarlettofthefae.com/tea-ceremony-with-todd-grube/>

<sup>24</sup> T. Grube, [www.facebook.com/todd.grube.3](https://www.facebook.com/todd.grube.3)

<sup>25</sup> Jo Hickey-Hall, <https://www.scarlettofthefae.com/tea-ceremony-with-todd-grube/>

first and only fairy encounter since I started my research. During my meditation, I encountered two small fairy-like creatures in a boat, who took me across a lake to the foot of a mountain which I then had to climb, leaving the fairy beings (small, Asian faces, wearing pale green hessian robes, no wings, sparkles or tiaras) at the bottom. Halfway up the mountain, I found a large slate cavern. I entered and met with what I would describe as a 'Sage,' dressed regally in gold, red and black robes, seated in the lotus position on a dais. I walked over, bowed and the figure motioned me to sit, which I did. I asked the Sage, where the fairies were, and why I had not seen any. The Sage clapped their hands together then opened them to reveal a very English looking spring meadow filled with wildflowers, and very English looking fairies and gnomes milling around. The Sage then communicated to me that the fairies were there, had always been there and were all around me. I thanked them, and turned to leave, and found myself skiing down the mountain, with one of the fairies, a tiny, blonde female with wings and a wand who kept buzzing at my head and flying away and giggling. I reached the bottom, where the two fairy-like beings were waiting in the boat, and they ferried me back across the lake. At that point, Todd called us back, we all reconnected with the Zoom call. The experience that I relate here had taken about forty minutes.

The British Isles have a strong tradition of folklore and tales of a specific race of areligious, supernatural, humanoid beings that differ from each other in several ways, but which nevertheless have been and continue to be classified as fairies. The tales of these creatures are generally believed to be just stories for the fireside, for long winter nights, for children. Yet, many accounts also exist of real encounters between humans and fairies; not fairy tales but witness statements, where encounters and even adventures with the fairies really happened to them. Some of these accounts go back as far as the seventh century in Anglo-Saxon England, and are also being recorded now, in the 2020s.

For many, the topic of fairies, fairy belief, the supernatural, the paranormal, will often occupy a frivolous space, considered childish, not serious, not worthy of research. Any conclusions reached will not be seen as meaningful or useful. I disagree. Fairy belief has to be of fundamental interest to academics concerned with social, cultural and political fields of study. The beliefs contained in the history and folklore of fairies have endured for many centuries. And while I have certainly attempted to keep an open mind about what is essentially the study of entities whose existence cannot be proven, I must declare my own belief in the existence of the paranormal and in the possibility of manifestations of entities from a different plane of reality. This mindset allows for possibilities and therefore a greater degree of investigation. The study of fairy belief will always be inconclusive on the subject of the existence or not of fairies, and given that proof will probably never be found, it is far more interesting to examine what fairy belief tells us about human society, spirituality and culture.

Kate Kingsbury has long grappled with the tradition in anthropological studies, of keeping neutral when engaged in ethnographical research, and the avoidance of 'going native.' As Kingsbury elucidates, such a position is rejected in academic research. It is considered almost career ending, certainly leaving the researcher open to ridicule.<sup>26</sup> Kingsbury cites some brave ethnographers however, who have recognised the value of 'affect rather than observation'<sup>27</sup> in their research into spiritual matters in particular. Timothy Landry, she cites, 'pointed out, on his study of Vodun in Benin, that his most valuable research tool was apprenticeship into the spirituality.'<sup>28</sup> Most interesting is that both Jeanne Favret-Saada, researching witchcraft in the Bocage, and Landry have argued that

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<sup>26</sup> K. Kingsbury, *Autoethnography of Holy Death: Belief, Dividuality and Family in the Study of Santa Muerte*, in the *Journal of Contemporary Ethnography*, 2022, Vol. 51 (6) p.784-815

<sup>27</sup> *ibid.*, p785

<sup>28</sup> *ibid.*, p. 785

research into magical traditions can only be successful and, above all, respectful and ethical when the anthropologist lets go of science, embracing the spirituality they are studying. Only then may they swim in new ontologies and discover alternative possibilities that are key to mystical experiences.<sup>29</sup>

It goes without saying that every ethnographer researching cultures and beliefs other than their own, who spends extended amounts of time with people in their home environments, should be ‘respectful and ethical.’ However, according to Kingsbury, any researcher going native ‘and adopt[ing] local practices (whether occult or otherwise) ... will be criticised, become “professionally doomed”, and will be “assumed to have lost some necessary distance and objectivity”’.<sup>30</sup> The problematic word here is ‘objectivity’, which perhaps, as Kingsbury says, ‘is a hangover from the European colonial era’ and may have connotations, not of actual objectivity, but of distance and even superiority. But, equally, surely in order to avoid certain biases in research and credibility, some neutrality should be observed, not as a superior position, but to allow for fair, critical discussion. As previously mentioned, I have sought to keep an open mind during my research, trying not to allow my own biases to overshadow my research and my analyses, particularly when concerned with the accounts of fairy encounters that people have shared. I have shared my own experiences in some of the fairy practices, such as the *Cha -Dao* ceremony and guided meditation recounted at the start of this thesis. I have documented my participation at fairy festivals, my interactions with online groups involved in fairy research and spirituality. I have always tried to engage those I have designated as ‘fairy practitioners’ on both an academic and personal level. In my autoethnography therefore, I have striven to be authentic and genuine. By engaging with fairy belief where I found it, I have been able to gain deeper insights into the practice of fairy belief today. And in all honesty, I still have not fully decided what I believe when I study these encounters. I want to believe, but some accounts trouble me. However, my concern in this thesis is not the veracity of the accounts but what the

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<sup>29</sup> *ibid.*, p.785

<sup>30</sup> *ibid.*, p.786

accounts represent in terms of articulating fairy belief in the current century. This thought also occupied David Hay and Kate Hunt when interviewing participants in their study on religious experiences. They took pains to choose participants who were not affiliated to mainstream religions.<sup>31</sup> However, it is clear that at least in terms of studies of spirituality, autoethnography does give more valuable insights into the subject, than maintaining an 'objective' position, which effectively keeps the researcher on the outside. For Kingsbury, becoming an acolyte of the *Santa Muerte* was largely because she would not have had the same access to what is at times a closed and exclusive practice, often marginalised and criticised for the very things that outsiders are not party to. The same goes for Witchcraft and Vodun as exemplified in Kingsbury's paper.<sup>32</sup> And there are aspects of fairy practice that involve some information not shared outside belief groups. But, while I can certainly see the value that Kingsbury gives to immersive participation, there is, not the danger of ostracism from academia to be feared, but certainly a question that one could become more of a spokesperson for the belief system studied, rather than an academic capable of critical engagement. I would always advocate for participation but with some reserve.

The main purpose of this thesis is to argue in favour of a wide ranging and comprehensive study of fairies and fairy-like beings as an integral part of human history, belief and culture. It is because they are such a deep-rooted part of human experience, that they deserve to be studied closely. My contribution to this study is divided into three main parts: background, experiences and cultural influences.

Part one deals with the history and folklore, the background to fairy belief. My focus for this part of the thesis are the traditions and folklore of the nation of England, as it is now and has largely

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<sup>31</sup> D. Hay and K. Hunt, *Understanding the Spirituality of People who don't go to Church: a report on the findings of the Adults Spirituality Project*, Nottingham University, 2000, p.4

<sup>32</sup> J. Favret Saada and Timothy Landry

been geographically, since the Early Medieval period. These topics have been studied already by scholars, largely in specific periods of history, and specific kinds of folklore, or as a subsection of general works on folklore. I wanted to represent these topics in one place, examining some of the range of academic works available. In this thesis the history of fairies and fairy belief is tracked along a linear timeline. When placed next to each other in chronological order, the different epochs of history which are documented in most of the historical accounts, appear to show a kind of evolution of fairy belief, reflecting the social and cultural discourses of each age. This is apparent when looking at the extant written records that go back to the early Middle Ages, at the time when English society was dominated by the Anglo Saxons. However, there are also some scant records from the Romano/British era, that mention 'Campestres' that seem similar to the elementals and nature spirits which the Romans believed in.<sup>33</sup> At any rate, written evidence of fairy belief has existed for at least thirteen centuries, maybe more, and over this period of time, folklore has grown up that relates exclusively to fairies and fairy-like beings. As history has progressed, as philosophy and technology have developed, as belief in the supernatural, including religious belief, has continued, fairy belief has also persisted. This fact is at the heart of this study: the persistence of belief in, and indeed encounters with, fairies and fairy-like beings, which are not allied with religious belief (except when expedient), that use magic, that imitate some human activity, that look like humans, but with some distortions, that dress in the fashions of a bygone age and which have folklore and superstitions associated with them that continue to endure over time.

Part two is probably the area that is overlooked the most: the experiences of people who see fairies, and what kinds of fairies actually are being seen or otherwise experienced. C.S. Lewis and Richard Firth Green both suggest that more attention needs to be given to the entities

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<sup>33</sup> S. Young, *The Campestres: Romano-British Fairies?* On Beachcomber's Bizarre History Blog, 2015, accessed July 2025



themselves, which also echoes Linda Woodhead's idea from her paper *The Gods of Modern Spirituality*, that when we are giving a socio-cultural view of supernatural, spiritual or religious beings:

in neither the sociology nor anthropology of religion do we give much attention to the gods. If we do, it is usually in terms of their social and cultural functions. That's understandable, but we are in danger of mimicking the social scientist who analyses tennis in terms of race, class gender and politics and fails to mention the game: the central element is forgotten. Because something so interesting is happening in the "theosphere" of modern spirituality, it seems worthy of attention, even before we go onto consider the social dimensions.<sup>34</sup>

In order to promote this 'central element' I take data collected in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries by researchers, largely in the fields of folklore, with interest from Spiritualism, Theosophy and mainstream religion. I have classified the types of people who experience fairies, according to data about themselves which they have shared voluntarily. I then analyse what they have in common, what is different between them, and what they have to say about the experience. I also classify the kinds of entities recorded in the data, again looking for commonalities, as well as differences, to try and categorise them in broad and meaningful groupings. In this way, I am giving a voice to the participants, who mostly have not sought this kind of encounter but nevertheless want to share such a unique and rare experience. Often, the experiences are recorded, interest is shown, but I go further, looking more deeply into the nature of the entity being seen, the context of the encounter, and the kind of person or people who have experienced it. The collectors of the data, who are mostly folklorists and researchers, have presented it, but rarely go on to investigate what is going on in these encounters. I am interested in what meanings are being created for people, what contribution to culture fairies are making, given that they have been around since society and culture were created. And

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<sup>34</sup> L. Woodhead, *The Gods of Modern Spirituality*, in *Situating Spirituality: Context, Practice, and Power*, B. Steensland, Kucinkas, J. and Sun, A, Oxford University Press, 2022, pp. 49 – 71

indeed, how fairies have adapted at important points of cultural change. In short, the voices of those who experience fairies are amplified by examining their accounts and linking them to history, culture and folklore. They are telling us of rich, diverse and uncanny experiences and deserve to be taken seriously.

The final part of the thesis argues that fairies have continued and continue to contribute to human culture, both influencing it, and being influenced by it. Fairies have caused the creation of superstitions, in the invention of charms to placate and control them. They have caused the deployment of edicts, from some parts of the Catholic Church in the Medieval period, on how to deal with fairy belief.<sup>35</sup> They have inspired art, literature and music. Fairies have been used for political campaigns, marketing strategies, decoration and entertainment. The most important areas that I explore are their importance in nostalgic discourses, in the nature of enchantment, and in the development of alternative spiritualities, which continue to the present. By examining fairies, fairy-like beings and overall fairy belief via their history, folklore, participants, entities and cultural influences, this thesis makes an original contribution to the Academy in its research into religion, spirituality, beliefs, social groups and culture.

So, who are the fairies? Why do tales of them persist throughout a time when Christianity was the most powerful religion in Europe, with a merciless and indefatigable persecuting nature? And beyond, when the Enlightenment encouraged a materialistic philosophy,<sup>36</sup> or when Darwin's research connected us, not to God, but to primates, and single cell organisms were the beginning of life on this planet. Why did the Romantics re-awaken a popular interest in fairies? Why did Victorian and Edwardian England become obsessed with fairies and other supernatural phenomena? Why do people still record accounts of sightings of fairies in the

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<sup>35</sup> I go into more detail in Chapter 2.

<sup>36</sup> The enlightenment is usually considered taking place from the mid-seventeenth century until the beginning of the nineteenth century.

technological age, where computer games and virtual reality can provide us with HD reality never before imagined? How has belief in fairies survived the long and changeable watches of history?

In order to give adequate space to the two lines of inquiry, part one of the thesis looks at and gives an account of some of the vast history and folklore surrounding fairies in England alone, and the social and cultural significance and impact of fairies and fairy belief over time. The first two chapters give, respectively, a historical overview, and a summary of the most popular fairy folklore. In chapter one, fairy belief seems to follow a chronological development, from the earliest records in the Anglo-Saxon period found in medical journals,<sup>37</sup> to the present day. I look at the reciprocal influences of mainstream religion, politics and culture on fairy belief, and also discuss the nature of and influence from vernacular belief, including integrated superstitions and propitiation that began to develop around fairy belief especially during the Early Modern period. I also explore some of the influences of art and literature in interpreting fairy belief. I then bring fairy belief up to the present day, with its resurgent popularity since the twentieth century, thanks to popular entertainment culture, in cinema and television, and New Age spirituality, and indeed the revival of the Fairy Investigation Society by Dr Simon Young, and his *Fairy Census*.

The second chapter looks at the major aspects of fairy folklore that have endured and developed over the centuries, and some of which are relatively recent though give the appearance of ancient wisdom. Much of what we take for granted in folklore is quite old, but perhaps the most important aspect of fairy belief that seems to be taking over now is the

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<sup>37</sup> A. Hall, op. cit. p.96

Theosophical fairy, which became popular towards the end of the Victorian period and seems to have developed and increased in popularity during the twentieth and twenty-first centuries.<sup>38</sup>

Chapters three and four are an examination of the people who see fairies, and the entities that they see. In many respects, these two chapters are the central focus of the thesis in that they represent actual experiences had by a wide range of people over a continuous period of living memory: from the 1920s to the present day. In Chapter three, using data from the sources mentioned previously, I try to construct a picture of the kinds of people who see fairies (and who also do not have a problem with sharing their encounters). I have looked at background data based on gender, age, decades, location, time of day and duration. These are the categories with the most recorded data. Then any additional information given that can throw a light onto who the participant is and what happened to them. The narratives range from basic and factual or descriptive, to deeply philosophical and spiritual, presenting an interesting picture of the entities and the humans alike, which are then examined in more detail in these chapters. Some of the participants are clearly already believers in the supernatural and have had other experiences of the otherworldly kind, but also many of the participants are not believers, even if they have an interest in general forms of the paranormal and they are completely nonplussed by the experience. What is clear is that what the people experience is a very personal, and unique, usually once in a lifetime encounter, but also that it is happening to a significant number of people; a singular experience for each of them, but full of collective similarities and commonalities that tell us about our social history, folklore and capacity for belief. No wonder fairy belief was discouraged by the Church (and still is), fairies demonised and practitioners of fairy magic persecuted, tortured and killed.

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<sup>38</sup> Blavatsky, Helena P. "Elementals." In *Collected Writings* 6: pp.184-201. Wheaton, IL: Theosophical Publishing House, 1975

Chapter four focuses on the nature and personality of the fairies themselves, and I have taken a deliberate and direct instruction from Woodhead, to examine the ‘central element.’<sup>39</sup> This chapter includes the appearance and apparel of the fairies, their behaviour and the effect the encounter might have on the surrounding environment. Most of the data are visual. I have created my own taxonomy of fairy beings in this chapter, largely for ease of analysis of the data. Taxonomies can be useful, though not every researcher into fairies thinks they are a good thing. But in order to be able to find commonalities and write about them in a single chapter, it does help. It also highlights exceptions, however, which is the downside of any collectivisation; there will always be those that just do not fit. I hope I have been able to highlight these and to give them a fair hearing too. At first, I also tried to correlate the encounters with traditional folklore but early on it was clear that very rarely did the traditional behaviours of fairies occur in these encounters. Thank goodness in some cases. Visually, the fairies were very much exemplified through the range of ‘types,’ But in the majority of cases, many of the encounters do not live up to some of the popular folktales of fairy behaviour. The strange music and sounds, the weird lights in the sky and around trees are about as close as modern encounters come to the folklore studies of the past. Thankfully, abductions and changelings no longer seem to form part of the fairy/human experience anymore, however, there are still tricks being played by some of the fairy entities, like being pixey led.<sup>40</sup>

In part two of the thesis, I examine four areas where fairies have a particular significance and influence on present day culture. Chapter five looks at the relationship between fairies and nostalgia. Nostalgia is experiencing an academic revival of interest as a cultural phenomenon, and fairies and fairy belief play an important part in the construction of nostalgic narratives. I investigate the events of the Cottingley fairy photographs from the 1920s which still attract

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<sup>39</sup> L. Woodhead, *op.cit.*, pp. 49 -71

<sup>40</sup> In the fairy census, two men get led astray by a fairy whistler on Boxing Day in the countryside, and in a recent newspaper report, a woman is pixey led while on a sponsored walk.

interest in many areas. There have been several films made about Cottingley, documentaries and books are still trying to make sense of an affair that was seen at the time as groundbreaking. The discovery that fairies might be real and have been caught on camera, attracted the attention, largely in support, of some very eminent figures, and captured public imagination for several years. What is interesting is how, in spite of being declared fakes by the photographers themselves in the early 1980s, there is still a reluctance to shake off belief in them altogether.<sup>41</sup> Given that nostalgia is mostly used to create a sanitised and more beautiful view of the past, these photographs certainly contributed to this in their time, for a world trying to recover from cataclysm and grief.

Chapter six looks at the nature of enchantment and the role of fairies in both enchanting and re-enchanted the world and using enchantment for their own ends. Perhaps enchantment is the wrong word to use in the case of fairies. There is much written about enchantment, and disenchantment and re-enchantment, as a sense of wonder. But fairy enchantment is different, it has always been a deception; fairies use enchantment as a tool. However, fairies are also a part of the general enchantment of the world and have been for perhaps the duration of fairy belief. But while the element of wonder may also be a part of fairy encounters and fairy belief, it is more of a by-product than a purpose. Fairies of the Medieval and Early Modern period are largely hidden and rarely seen. It is not until the Victorian period that they are quite literally brought into the light. Perhaps, with the continuing trend of the endogenous fairy, in the last and current century, there is a movement towards wonder rather than deception, especially as, fairies no longer seem to conform to their pre-modern archetypes.

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<sup>41</sup>S. Young (ed.) *The Cottingley Fairy Photographs: New Approaches to Fairies, Fakes and Folklore*, Pwca Pamphlets, #2024, p.10-11

Chapter seven looks at the relatively new trend in fairy spirituality, which follows along the lines of Theosophy which was popular from the middle of the nineteenth century. Fairies have changed in nature in the last one hundred years, no longer the solitary vagabonds, or raggle-taggle dancers in the meadow, but now seen as wise and industrious elemental beings, who keep nature going, and can be consulted for advice and help. With this change in approach comes the rise in so-called fairy practitioners, which will be examined in detail in chapter eight, with case studies of those who influence this area currently. The most visible in this sphere, are Karen Kay, Claire Casely and Jo Hickey Hall, three of the most influential fairy experts who have large followings via social media, blogs, vlogs and podcasts, and who speak about their experiences and expertise on their websites. These three, predominantly, lead the way for the cultivation of spiritual relationships between fairies and humans. The propagation of the specific female winged fairy is the type gaining in strength as the archetypal fairy, with powers to bestow healing, blessings, advice and comfort. These fairies are often accessed via visualisations, meditations, readings and even channelling. There have always been gatekeepers of the supernatural, and in fairy this is no different. And while all of the practitioners I investigate would fully endorse the fact that anyone can see fairies if they want to, there is a declared truth which all of them state, that they have a special connection with fairies and fairy-like beings which they are able to use as mediators for the rest of us. These practitioners are mediums in the traditional sense, if we were talking about Spiritualism, but instead of channelling the spirits of the departed, they have a direct line to fairyland. What the data from the encounters show, is that the practitioners might not really be needed, as plenty of people are managing to see the fairies on their own. However, there is also the sense that this spiritual kind of fairy is a different kind of fairy experience. None of the examples of encounters I have documented show any compulsion on the part of the fairy to impart wisdom to the human participant. Only a handful of the encounters talk of any communication between the fairy and the human, and it is not extensive or even sensical. But fairy encounters via a fairy practitioner

are much more informative. All of the practitioners I have studied state that the fairies want to communicate with us, we just have to listen.

So, in the words of W. B. Yeats, 'Come away, O human child/To the waters and the wild/With a faery, hand in hand/For the world's more full of weeping than you can understand.'<sup>42</sup>

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<sup>42</sup> W. B Yeats, *The Stolen Child*, 1869





## **Part One**

## Chapter One

### Fairy Belief through the Ages

I work on the premise that our texts are not merely articulations or reflections of belief: they were and remain active participants in a discourse of belief conducted both between the members of textual communities, and between the communities and their texts.

Alaric Hall<sup>1</sup>

"Her light is growing faint, and if it goes out, that means she is dead! Her voice is so low I can scarcely tell what she is saying. She says—she says she thinks she could get well again if children believed in fairies! Do you believe in fairies?"

J.M. Barrie<sup>2</sup>

Before taking a closer look at what fairies are and what cultural work they are doing, it is important to establish where they have come from. There is a strong and in places well documented history of fairy belief, including encounters, stories, medical journals, court transcripts, art, music and literature. These items cannot and should not be ignored, or worse absorbed into a general and unspecific definition of the supernatural. These records at the very least record a part of our history, and certainly the history of people who have lived on this earth and had such experiences. In the same way that we may record how people lived out their lives in differing epochs of history, we should not leave out the unusual, the unexplainable, the paranormal. And just as understanding how ancient peoples ate, drank and dressed, how they worked, fought and constructed their societies, it is also important to understand what they believed and how they practised their beliefs. And while we study the mainstream religions of the world and our own societies, we can learn about their lives from their engagement with the phenomenon of fairy belief. At the very least given that these documents exist, we should try to make sense of them in the same way that we would try to make sense of a minor politician's

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<sup>1</sup> A. Hall, *Elves in Anglo Saxon England*, op. cit., p.11

<sup>2</sup> J.M. Barrie, *Peter Pan and Wendy*, 1911, p.198

diary, or the letters from a soldier to his family, or the edicts of a King. Whatever history leaves behind is of interest to future peoples. Fairy Belief has a history that stretches back to ancient empires and civilisations, and probably beyond to primitive cultures.<sup>3</sup> These ‘magical, living, resident humanoids’ are elusive entities, with some supernatural power, that live in communities in the vicinity of humans, but are largely unperceived by them.<sup>4</sup> Fairy belief may have begun as a veneration of nature spirits, the earliest evidence of which can be found in Botswana, in the Tsodilo Hills, where a shrine to a python spirit has been found, dating back over 70,000 years.<sup>5</sup> While this may not be direct evidence of how far back fairy belief goes, it does show the recognition early societies gave the power of nature and by association those spirits who represent it, which does eventually include the fairies.

The use of the word ‘fairy’ to describe the beings that this thesis examines did not really become established until the sixteenth century, although it had been used beforehand. From the earliest written evidence of fairy-like creatures in the Anglo-Saxon period, they were called ‘Elves’ (*aelves*), another name which has continued to be used as a descriptive term for some of these entities. This word comes to us from the many Germanic influences on English culture and even the Nordic tradition, prevalent in the first millennium.<sup>6</sup>

In this chapter, I want to trace the historical development of fairy belief in England, beginning with those earliest writings from the sixth century. I will then track their development as a vernacular belief during the Medieval period, interacting with the domination of the Christian Church in England. From the sixteenth century, and the start of the Early Modern period, ‘fairy’ is the most common title given to these creatures, with ‘*Elves*’ relegated to a subset. Historical shifts and social change, predominantly within the Church, are mirrored in the way that fairy

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<sup>3</sup> D. Purkiss, *Troublesome Things*, op. cit., p.11-19

<sup>4</sup> S. R Young, *We Need to Talk about Fairies in Mythical Folk*, Gibson Square, 2019, p.12

<sup>5</sup> Yngve Vogt, ‘World’s Oldest Ritual Discovered. Worshipped the Python 70,000 Years Ago.’ Trans. by Alan Louis Belardinelli. *Apollon Research Magazine*, 2012

<sup>6</sup> A. Hall, op. cit., p.176

belief develops at this time, and a hostility between fairies and humans settles in, reinforced by the surrounding culture.

Romanticism in literature and art takes up the fairies next, mostly continuing the hostility. The eighteenth century is probably the time when we see the most popular folklore writings and fairy tales collected by folklorists.<sup>7</sup> From the nineteenth century, fairies evolve wings, wands and tiaras, become smaller and infantilised, often depicted as children or childlike. The word 'fairy,' though still used as an umbrella term, detaches somewhat from describing all fairylike beings to describing a small, feminised, winged creature, with words like 'elves' and 'gnomes' describing the little men creatures.

Theosophy (as well as theology) is responsible for one of the largest changes in fairy belief, often at odds with fairy folklore, dominating most of the fairy belief of the twentieth century. The Cottingley fairy photographs are also responsible for a surge in fairy belief in between the wars of the twentieth century. Popular culture also takes up the baton, with Disney in particular shaping ideas about fairies and fairylike beings that continues today. From the late 20<sup>th</sup> century to the present, largely thanks to hardworking folklorists, academics and fairy practitioners, fairy belief has become popular again, and technology has done much to enhance this popularity. Fairy folklore is still popular, as are newer kinds of fairy spiritualities, fairy activism and even fairy consumerism. Fairies continue to endure, no matter what goes on historically, socially and culturally, and no doubt will continue into the future, reverting to older tropes and inventing new ones, but never disappearing entirely.

### **Anglo-Saxon Elves**

The people of the British Isles would have been aware of Christianity since its beginnings in the first century CE, as an outpost of the Roman empire, and the Church began to be established in

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<sup>7</sup> D. Purkiss, *Troublesome Things*, op. cit. p.293

Great Britain and Ireland during the later Roman and sub-Roman period.<sup>8</sup> Pagan Anglo-Saxon culture and beliefs then usurped and dominated the still growing Christian Church, pushing it back towards Wales and Cornwall, where the church continued to exert influence, until the Christianisation of Anglo-Saxon peoples across the rest of England in the seventh century.<sup>9</sup> Belief in fairies did not diminish during this time, apparently, but was clearly affected by these other cultural movements. Katharine Briggs dates fairies as far back as somewhere between the fifth and eighth centuries CE and also argues that the early medieval stories of fairies and fairy-like beings, as well as the later medieval tales could go back further, to a supposed oral tradition of pre-Roman inhabitants.<sup>10</sup> Karen Jolly traces the development of *aelves* alongside the development of the Anglo-Saxon Christian Church.<sup>11</sup> She states that, ‘various ways of combining these divergent traditions (folk practices and Christian ideas) occurred side by side in the same manuscript (the *Lacnunga* and the *Leechbook*<sup>12</sup>), offering several alternative ways of understanding a given problem.’<sup>13</sup> She maintains that while we must see the ‘congruence between folk and Christian cosmologies’, she aims to ‘explore the dynamics of these middle practices as expressions of an Anglo-Saxon Christian worldview.’<sup>14</sup> Jolly sees the two cultures, Anglo-Saxon and Christian Anglo-Saxon, as intertwined.<sup>15</sup> This could indicate that fairy belief in general was shaped or at the very least influenced by both pre- and contemporary Christian culture. *Aelves* during this period are mostly unseen or rarely seen; only their activities are evident to humans, the main one being the shooting of animals and occasionally humans with invisible poisonous bolts that cause illness: ‘elf-shot.’ The illnesses caused by elf-shot were many and varied and were even classified in some remedies according to the type of elf

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<sup>8</sup> Henig, Martin, *Religion in Roman Britain*. New York: St Martin's Press, 1984, p.121

<sup>9</sup> Mayr-Harting, Henry (1991). *The Coming of Christianity to Anglo-Saxon England* (3rd ed.). London: Batsford, pp18 & 25-26

<sup>10</sup> K. Briggs, *Fairies in Tradition and Literature*, (London: Routledge and Keegan Paul Ltd., 1967), p.4

<sup>11</sup> K. Jolly, *Popular Religion in Late Anglo-Saxon England*, 1996, p.9-10

<sup>12</sup> Surviving medical manuscripts reputedly from the 6<sup>th</sup> – 8<sup>th</sup> century CE.

<sup>13</sup> K. Jolly, *op.cit.*, p.106-7

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, p.18

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, p.21

involved. The most common though include a sharp pain, like those associated with a stitch, or a pain flare, but also jaundice, heartburn, and psychological illnesses like ‘demon possession, nightmares, madness, fevers and other mind-altering afflictions of seemingly malevolent origin.’<sup>16</sup> Though Jolly also points out that diagnoses often went unrecorded except on rare occasions, and what we do know is predicated by the types of remedy applied, which are recorded. There are many remedies for the afflictions of ‘elf-shot’, predominantly the herb ‘Betony (*betonica officinalis*)’ which was and is a prolific perennial, growing mostly in meadows throughout the UK, even today.<sup>17</sup> Interestingly, the mention of cutting this herb ‘without the use of iron’ references common folklore related to fairies, who do not like iron and can be repelled by it.<sup>18</sup> This raises an interesting question about the use of iron in the collection of Betony as a remedy against a malady caused by elves. Of which, more later. The curative process, according to Jolly, however, seems to be of a purgative nature, ‘to purge or exorcise internal evil.’<sup>19</sup> This action seems to at least recollect an idea of spirit possession, by the illness caused by elf-shot and also fits in with early Christian theologies of illness as well as the type of supernatural creatures with which she associates elves. While some afflictions in the New Testament, cured by Jesus and the disciples, were physical (e.g. blindness, lameness, leprosy), there were also a number of examples of spiritual maladies (which, of course, may have physical symptoms), such as most commonly, demon possession. This does seem to represent a feeling of the closeness, as documented elsewhere in Jolly’s research, of elvish affliction and that of demons.<sup>20</sup> And in fact, Jolly asserts that the nature of elvish behaviour, ‘their invisibility, their malicious attacks and the need to ‘charm’ them away’<sup>21</sup> seemed to easily fit elves into a negative, demonic view of them in Christian terms, and this view extended into the Medieval

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<sup>16</sup> Ibid., p.133

<sup>17</sup> Ibid., p.135

<sup>18</sup> R. Dean, *Ferrous Friend or Foe? How iron became the enemy of the fairy folk* in Folklore Thursday, 2017 [www.folklorethursday.com/folklore-of-archaeology/ferrous-friend-foe-iron-became-enemy-fairy-folk/](http://www.folklorethursday.com/folklore-of-archaeology/ferrous-friend-foe-iron-became-enemy-fairy-folk/), accessed august 2024

<sup>19</sup> K. Jolly, op cit., 136

<sup>20</sup> Ibid., p.136

<sup>21</sup> Ibid., p.136

period. The nature of the charms themselves represent a positioning of elf-attacks in amongst a whole host of other maladies, rather than singling them out as particular. There is also the nature and complexity of the charms, the particular steps that one must go through in order to guarantee their efficacy, and the combination of the various aspects: the herbal part, the addition of non-medicinal carriers, such as ale or holy water (the inclusion of which Jolly demonstrates as fundamental in the majority of the remedies),<sup>22</sup> and then the words that need to be spoken, and/or written during the preparation and administration of the remedy. The fact that Christian liturgy combines with herbal concoctions for a wide range of illnesses, not only those associated with elf-shot, but also including demon possession, for Jolly, demonstrates the perception that only the power of the word of God can cure and heal and also that elf-shot is not singled out as a peculiar or special malady, requiring liturgical intervention. Rather, it is one of many afflictions. If nothing else, its inclusion in a list of maladies and remedies seems to normalise the belief in elves alongside belief in demon possession, and all the other illnesses, diseases and afflictions that occur in animals and humans.

Alaric Hall is concerned predominantly with a linguistic study of '*aelves*' in the same medical records as Jolly, and also in Anglo-Saxon translations from the Old Testament where descriptions of a treacherous or unholy beauty are described as '*aelvish*'.<sup>23</sup> Hall's research focuses on how the word '*aelf*' integrates 'linguistic and textual approaches into an anthropologically inspired theoretical framework, [making] possible a history both of the word *aelf*, and of the concepts it denoted throughout the Anglo-Saxon period.'<sup>24</sup> He also contends that the conception of *aelves* is not just a representation of the Christianization of Anglo-Saxon culture but tells us 'about Anglo-Saxon constructions of illness, mental health, and healing; of

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<sup>22</sup> Ibid., pp. 166-167

<sup>23</sup> Ibid., p. 75-95

<sup>24</sup> Ibid., p.4



group identities; and even of gender and sexual relationships.<sup>25</sup> Hall is therefore inclined, unlike Jolly, to see Anglo-Saxon culture and Christian Anglo-Saxon culture as distinct, even though they may share influences. What is clear from Hall's scholarship is that he is talking about a specific individual creature that we can understand better because of how it is described linguistically. What is 'elfish' is peculiarly defined by the meaning of the word 'elfish.' But it also raises the question, once we move into the eras of more comprehensible English, about what we mean by 'elf' and indeed 'fairy' because these terms can be taken for granted and because the words and the culture within which they exist are recognisable. Hall asks us to look very carefully at the linguistics of *aelf* when examining what it means within Anglo-Saxon culture. Hall also draws comparisons with witch trial confessions in the Early Modern period, where Anglo-Saxon ideas of fairies (elves) seem to have recurred largely unchanged almost half a millennium later. He quotes Stuart Clark who says 'the assumption that beliefs in witchcraft were essentially incorrect... has prevailed in witchcraft studies for so long because of an overriding, though largely unspoken, commitment to the realist model of knowledge.'<sup>26</sup> Clark criticises the widely held belief that there is a discrepancy between an objective reality-based view of the world, and the world where witchcraft is a real thing.<sup>27</sup> And Clark argues for the meaning of witchcraft belief 'not to follow reality but to be allowed to constitute it.'<sup>28</sup> If this is allowed then Clark believes that it will 'uncover the linguistic circumstances that enable the utterances and actions associated with witchcraft belief to convey meaning.'<sup>29</sup> This is what Hall is trying to achieve with the word '*aelf*'. He accuses some scholars of having 'striven to distinguish between "real" and "supernatural" beings, when our lexical and where we have it, literary evidence militates against this division... it is a division which can restrict understanding

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<sup>25</sup> Ibid., p.4

<sup>26</sup> Ibid., p.169

<sup>27</sup> S. Clarke, *Thinking with Demons: The ideas of Witchcraft in Early Modern Europe*, Oxford: OUP 1997, pp.3-10

<sup>28</sup> Ibid., p.6

<sup>29</sup> Ibid., p.6

even of twentieth century Western Culture.<sup>30</sup> Hall is also confident that his approach can ‘undermine the long-standing idea... that beliefs in otherworldly beings were somehow a distinctively ‘Celtic’ cultural feature in antique and Medieval Europe.’<sup>31</sup> Hall asserts that ‘*aelfe*’ were fundamentally similar to the early Irish *aes side* but with close counterparts among other Germanic-speaking cultures.<sup>32</sup> Hall returns to the Early Modern witchcraft trials to show how belief in fairies, especially as assistants in witchcraft, come, not from ‘a hypothetical, prehistoric, shamanic past’ but from the Anglo-Saxon period. Hall goes on to define the Anglo-Saxon ‘*aelfe*’ not so much as enemies of the people, like demons or monsters determined to destroy, as Jolly and many other scholars perceive them with their reading of the medical texts, but as humanlike and ‘otherworldly’, causing some pain and discomfort via ‘elf-shot’ not to harm diabolically, but to punish human transgressors for crimes against nature.<sup>33</sup> Elves, and later fairies could be supernatural beings who are on the side of nature, and of humanity, guiding humanity away from harming nature, which chimes with much later folklore and with Twenty-first century fairy eco-activism.<sup>34</sup>

### **Medieval Elves and Fairies**

During the long watches of the Medieval period, supernatural belief in general and fairy belief in particular, develops apace, with a diversity of types of fairy and with a growing gulf between good and evil, giving way to a jockeying for placement on which side certain entities may take. It would not be an exaggeration to call the stronghold that the Christian Church continues to have upon every layer of society across Europe, absolute. But, at this time, it seems that belief in fairies, still referred to as ‘elves’ into the Early Modern period, is prolific enough to excite the

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<sup>30</sup> A. Hall, op. cit., p.170

<sup>31</sup> Ibid., p.172

<sup>32</sup> Ibid., p.172

<sup>33</sup> Ibid., p.174

<sup>34</sup> A. Letcher, *The Scouring of the Shire: Fairies, Trolls and Pixies in Eco-Protest Culture*, 2001, *Folklore* 112(2):147-161

notice of the clergy and give rise to sermons: warnings against ‘women and girls dancing by night [with] whom they call *elvish folk*, and they believe that these can transform both men and women or, leaving others in their place, carry them with them to *Elfland*; all of these are mere fantasies bequeathed to them by an evil spirit.’<sup>35</sup> The following accusations extended towards fairy believers are harsh, they are seen as ‘faithless and worse than pagans, and four times a year they are cursed by the Lord and his holy church...They should know that they have forsaken the faith of Christ, betrayed their baptism, and incurred the anger and enmity of their God.’<sup>36</sup> On the face of it, it seems that the Church’s discourse regarding fairy belief has moved from being protective, i.e. with charms and remedies against fairies in the Anglo-Saxon period to ‘unrelieved antagonism’.<sup>37</sup> Richard Firth Green sees this antagonism as ‘the default position of the clerical elite,’ who saw the existence of a fairyland ‘as a contested site in the struggle between the official and unofficial cultures of the Middle Ages.’<sup>38</sup> The penalties placed upon those ‘who believe’, separating the fairy believer from the love of God would perhaps carry much more weight in those times. What is more interesting too, is the difference made between the dancers in the woods (the women and girls) who are depicted as weak of faith, deceived by the devil and to be pitied as ‘wretches’ and those who believe in fairies ‘stubbornly.’ They are the faithless ones; the dancers are deluded merely. In this snapshot of a sermon, typical of many from the late fourteenth and early fifteenth centuries, perhaps are represented in microcosm the general attitudes towards fairy belief. And while Green notes an accommodation seemingly made by the ‘vernacular culture’ towards the ‘orthodoxies of the Church,’ by way of ‘swear[ing] by the Virgin Mary, eagerness to attend mass, or anticipation of salvation on Doomsday,’<sup>39</sup> it is also clear that the Church was in no way placated and continued

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<sup>35</sup> R. F. Green, *Elf Queens and Holy Friars*, op.cit., p.1

<sup>36</sup> Ibid., p.1

<sup>37</sup> Ibid., p.2

<sup>38</sup> Ibid., p.2

<sup>39</sup> Ibid., p.2

to demonise fairies well into the modern era. But in the early Medieval period, the Church does its best to just ignore the fairies and 'deny their reality altogether.'<sup>40</sup>

Green defines the fairies found in the Medieval period as 'numinous, social, humanoid creatures who were widely believed to live at the fringes of the human lifeworld and interact intermittently with human beings.'<sup>41</sup> He cites a 16th century Icelandic account, which speaks of creatures 'invisible to us unless they wish to appear of their own volition... They know a thousand devices and an infinite number of tricks with which they harass men in wretched ways... and to take excessive pleasure in coupling with humans... innocent boys and girls and the young people and adolescents of both sexes have very often been taken away, though quite a few are restored safe and sound after a number of days, but some are never seen again.'<sup>42</sup>

The extract goes on to report that the fairies are 'some kind of mixed species created between spirits and animals, as some conjecture, yet it is certain that the appearance of these spirits has been common in many other regions, not only in Iceland.'<sup>43</sup> He further refers to a medical journal from the 13<sup>th</sup> century, very reminiscent of the earlier Anglo-Saxon period, where a charm is prescribed to repel the 'elves.' Concurrently, the Church preaches against belief in elves, as it did in Anglo-Saxon times. Both Jolly and Green acknowledge that apart from the folk tales, it is the religious records of the Medieval Church which give us the most information about fairy belief in that period, and that of course, Christianity was bound to give a hostile account of beliefs that they at least had held for centuries, that elves were no different from the demons and monsters that were a threat to faith in the Early Medieval period. The religious records, like the medical journals prior to them, offer their own remedies for fairy belief. The principle remedy, for example, appears to have been the Eucharist taken as an antidote to fairy visions.

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<sup>40</sup> Ibid., p.15

<sup>41</sup> Ibid., p.4

<sup>42</sup> Ibid., p.13

<sup>43</sup> Ibid., p.14

Quite simply, holding up the host or pronouncing the name of Jesus, or both were believed to dispel the vision. This is a continuation of the amalgamation of herbal remedies of probable pre-Christian Anglo-Saxon lore, and words taken from scripture and liturgy, commonly used in combination to cure 'elf-shot.' The rarely or unseen Anglo-Saxon elves still dominate the supernatural landscape, however, more closely allied perhaps with the ordinary agricultural folk, guiding them towards better behaviour and closer solidarity with the natural world. Briggs cites Gervase of Tilbury, who was also, incidentally, Chancellor of the Holy Roman Empire, as one of the earliest chroniclers of the first recognisable fairies since the Elves, the Portunes, whom he calls the ancestors of the Brownie and the Hob.<sup>44</sup> Portunes, in his thirteenth century *Otia Imperialia* are 'small, agricultural fairies. It was their habit to labour on farms, and at night when the doors were shut, they would blow up the fire, and, taking frogs from their bosoms, they would roast them on the coals and eat them.'<sup>45</sup> They were also renowned for leading horse riders astray, for no other reason than for the 'loud laugh and by sport of this sort he mocks the simplicity of mankind.'<sup>46</sup> Are the Portunes descendants of the Anglo-Saxon and early Medieval 'aelves'? These are no longer those same unseen creatures, but their smallness (half an inch high according to Gervase, and therefore easily overlooked) and association with agricultural affairs might make them so. However, in *Sir Lancelot of the Lake*, another 13<sup>th</sup> century writing and also one of the earliest tellings of the Arthurian legends, fairies were described as humans who knew magic. 'In those days all maidens that knew enchantments or charms were called 'fays', and there were many of them at this time, and more in Great Britain than in other lands.'<sup>47</sup> While this thinking is significantly removed from the elves of the Early Medieval period, it could simply be a divergence from the little, unseen creatures, rather than the next step in the development of fairy belief. That said, this divergence has perhaps contributed to the idea that

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<sup>44</sup> *ibid.*, p.7

<sup>45</sup> K. Briggs, *An Encyclopedia of Fairies*, Pantheon Books, 1976, p.333

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid.*, p.333

<sup>47</sup> *Ibid.*, p.333

there are two, if not more emergent strands of fairy belief at this time. Briggs supposes that the likes of Morgan Le Fay, the Lady of the Lake, Melusine may have roots in 'Celtic and classical tradition or perhaps stem from beliefs older than either.'<sup>48</sup> She also notes they 'owe their great powers to their knowledge of magic.' But there is no clear explanation of how these humans possessed themselves of magic, apart from the line in Malory, 'Morgan Le Fay was not married but set to school in a nunnery where she became a great mistress of magic.'<sup>49</sup> This is an enigmatic statement; it is not clear what access there would have been to train in magic in a 5<sup>th</sup> century Christian nunnery. Certainly, there may have been texts usually unavailable to people and to women especially contained in a monastic library, but if she learned magic, there is the implication that someone in the nunnery taught her, and that this practice was not unusual, unless she was able to teach herself, or there was some other supernatural answer. Perhaps these 'fairy' women are closer to our idea of witches rather than fairies, though indeed, fairies might conversely contribute to the origin story of witches. It is certainly interesting to contemplate fairies as having human ancestors, which could account for their subsequent quasi-human appearance and similar behaviour, but it does not account for the supernatural power. However, Briggs goes on to show the beginnings of a separation of fairies from humans thanks to Walter Map who writes in the 12<sup>th</sup> century about the swapping of a fairy wife for a human, and human beings rescued from Fairyland.<sup>50</sup> Fairyland is accepted as a real place, either in parallel to human reality, or buried deep beneath the ground, or inside hills, tumuli and barrows. Giraldus Cambrensis also describes a separate fairy realm with 'small people, fair haired and beautiful.'<sup>51</sup> But what this particular strand of fairy belief shows is how close fairy belief and witchcraft are. What the two have in common is magic, specifically knowledge and practice of supernatural power, and it is clear from these tales that certain humans, particularly

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<sup>48</sup> Ibid., p.137

<sup>49</sup> T. Malory, *The Morte d'Arthur*, (London: Caxton, 1485), p.16

<sup>50</sup> Briggs, op cit., p.5

<sup>51</sup> Ibid., p.6

female, but not necessarily always, have been gifted with such powers that caused them to be associated, as 'fays' with the fairy folk, rather than being one of them. Fairy folk are still implicitly in the background at this time. From the Medieval period, fairies in tales and reports take on a much more supernatural appearance and behaviour. This may be because of the approaching persecution of people as witches, Briggs argues, so divesting humans (usually women) of the powerful fairy magic and transferring it to actual supernatural beings perhaps was a way of protecting the enchantresses. However, it does not appear to have done them much good, according to Briggs.<sup>52</sup> Briggs goes on to document the rich seam of stories of some of the fairy creatures that have endured until the present, such as *Elidor*, who stole fairy treasure, boggarts, water spirits, fairy midwives and The Grant. Many of the stories require the stealing away of humans, who are either replaced by fairy intruders, or never seen again. This is the epoch of the changeling, an enduring trope of fairy folklore, which both Briggs and Diane Purkiss write about.

Finally, in this period begins the notion that Fairyland is the abode of the dead, and also that the fairy is a kind of fallen angel.<sup>53</sup> As the Medieval period draws to a close, the King and Queen of Fairy, become more popular in fairy tales. Overall, it is interesting to note how, particularly when religion had stronger and more threatening powers, belief in fairies continued to be held, alongside the official orthodoxies. And even as established religion has loosened or lost its hold on the population, with the coming of the Enlightenment, for example, interest in vernacular religions and spiritualities increased, including a continuance and resurgence of fairy belief in particular. Christianity seems to have had an ambivalent relationship with the fairies over the centuries. The worst penance the Church would impose upon those who confessed to believing

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<sup>52</sup> K. Briggs, *Fairies in Tradition and Literature*, Routledge Books, 1967, p.10

<sup>53</sup> *Ibid.*, p.12

in fairies, was ten days on bread and water. Not a severe penalty it would seem and one that is over relatively quickly.<sup>54</sup>

### **Early Modern fairies 1500 – 1800**

Edmund Spenser's *The Faerie Queene* (1596), written in homage to Elizabeth I, and in hope of reward, takes much of its inspiration from the Medieval romances outlined by Briggs and by Green. Twenty years earlier, in 1576, accused of witchcraft, Bessie Dunlop confesses to encounters with a fairy familiar, a human male called Tom who had been a soldier and died at the battle of Pinkye.<sup>55</sup> Her crime, however, is sorcery and witchcraft, and not consorting with fairies, but her testimony about her relationship with Tom gives us an insight to an interesting aspect of fairy belief: that of some humans going to fairyland instead of heaven or hell and becoming some kind of fairy intermediary.<sup>56</sup> In Bessie's confession, Tom talks about coming and going between 'Elfame' and bringing cures for Bessie to use in her profession of 'cunning' woman. It would appear that while the Church continued in its hostility towards fairy belief, it was not that which condemned Bessie, but witchcraft. Did she believe that by attributing the cures she performed to a war hero turned fairy might help her case in the end? If the supernatural skills she was accused of having were not actually hers, then she was not guilty of the charge? It continues to conflate the relationship between witchcraft and fairy belief that was prevalent in the Middle Ages. Two decades later writers were creating content that revolved around both the courtly fairy women of the Arthurian stories, and also the little elves who helped out around the home. Spenser's stories in *The Faerie Queene* involve both good and bad 'fays,' as well as knights and the Fairy King and Queen. At around the same time, Shakespeare wrote and performed in *A Midsummer Night's Dream* where, according to T. F. Thistleton- Dyer, he seeks to blend both the courtly and the peasant fairies of the late Medieval period, just as he

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<sup>54</sup> Green, op. cit., p.15

<sup>55</sup> E. Wilby, *Cunning Folk and familiar Spirits*, Sussex Academic Press, 2005, p.ix

<sup>56</sup> Ibid., p.xi



combined the lives and fortunes of the elite and common people depicted in his characters.<sup>57</sup> Shakespeare represents the hierarchical fairy world based on his own world and the plays; there is a king and queen, servants and subjects. However, Titania as Queen of the Fairies speaks of herself as more of a Goddess than a fairy, speaking of a 'votaress of my order'<sup>58</sup> implying she has temples and a priesthood, which is more akin to the Greek pantheon, and makes sense, as the play is set in Athens at the time of Theseus and Hippolyta. But Puck is similar to the Pooks and Poakes<sup>59</sup> of the Midland dialect of Shakespeare's home region, tales of which he would have been familiar. Oberon comes from the French Arthurian ballads which are also Medieval.<sup>60</sup> So Shakespeare's fairies rather than broaching a new strand of fairy belief tend to hark backwards to what has gone before.

After the Reformation and at the peak of the seventeenth century witch hunts, 'fairies and devils drew closer together.'<sup>61</sup> But, as Briggs goes on to say, 'even among the Puritans... a strand of belief persisted in the fairies as beings of a middle order between men and angels, or as "spiritual animals."'<sup>62</sup> So no matter how conflated they became with Christian demonology, they seem to avoid continuing there in the cultural imagination, and continue through to modern times as a distinctly areligious 'race' apart. Fairies are not angels or demons. They do not do the bidding of a deity, though some serve the Fairy Queen, but that would fit in with the class structure of the day.

Robert Kirk, whose pamphlet, *The Secret Commonwealth of Elves, Fauns, and Fairies*, written at the end of the seventeenth century, around the same time, incidentally, as the Salem Witch

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<sup>57</sup> T. F. Thistleton-Dyer, *Folklore of Shakespeare*, Project Gutenberg, 1884, p.2

<sup>58</sup> W. Shakespeare, *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, Act Two: Scene One

<sup>59</sup> P. Jones, *Pucks and Lights*, in *Magical Folk*, op. cit., 32-34

<sup>60</sup> C. M Wieland, *Oberon*, 1796

<sup>61</sup> K. Briggs, *The Fairies in Tradition and Literature*, op. cit., p.10

<sup>62</sup> *ibid.*, p.11

Trials were taking place, speaks of fairies as real and observable, giving detailed descriptions of how fairies behave and what they are like, as though he lived amongst them. He certainly seemed to believe that he did. Kirk's accounts are some of the earliest first-hand encounters that survive to the present. He recounts what he has been told by clairvoyant seers, as well as his own experiences. Kirk's fairies are 'of the nature of a condens'd cloud and best seen in twilight.'<sup>63</sup> He goes on to talk of 'their apparel and speech,' which is 'like that of the people and country under which they live... They speak but little, and that by way of whistling, clear, not rough...'<sup>64</sup> The demise of Robert Kirk is a veritable fairy tale in itself. He is said to have been walking on a tumulus when he fell faint and was taken up for dead. After his funeral, Kirk appeared as an apparition to a friend, commissioning him to go to his cousin, Grahame Duchray, with a message saying that Kirk was imprisoned in Fairyland and that he would appear in spirit form at the christening of his posthumous son, due to take place very soon. At the appearance of Kirk's spirit Duchray was to throw his 'dirk' over Kirk's head, and that act would restore him to the land of the living. The event took place as the Reverend prophesied, but Duchray was so taken aback by the apparition, he failed in his duty. The Reverend Kirk it would seem, remains in Fairyland to this day.<sup>65</sup>

Fairies in the late Medieval and Early Modern periods are famed for luring, stealing, and for general mischief, ranging from merely being annoying to life-threatening. There are stories of people enchanted by 'will-o'-the-wisps' (*ignis fatuus*) into bogs and wastelands, of a baby stolen and replaced with an old and withered fairy woman, of a young man seduced away from his true love by the Fairy Queen, or a young woman falling asleep on a fairy mound, only to wake years later to find all her family and friends long dead. Diane Purkiss tells the story of 'Yallery Brown' a yellow haired fairy man who, on being rescued from under a rock by a lazy farmhand,

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<sup>63</sup> R. Kirk, *The Secret Commonwealth of Elves, Fauns and Fairies*, 1691, op. cit., p.1

<sup>64</sup> *ibid.*, p.2, p.5

<sup>65</sup> *ibid.* p.2

promises to help the youth with his work as long as he is never thanked. But this 'help' rebounds on the farmhand; all the neighbours keep away from him because they see his work being done by 'invisible hands,' so, as a final attempt to be rid of the fairy, the farmhand thanks him for his work. But instead of leaving him, Yallery Brown haunts him with nightly recriminatory screams until the farmhand dies 'alone and destitute.'<sup>66</sup>

### **GRT Communities and fairy belief**

The Gypsy, Roma and Traveller (GRT) communities are still amongst Europe's most discriminated against and maligned, often, even in recent times, the subject of sensationalist TV shows and documentaries which serve to reinforce prejudice against them. However, what is interesting as far as this thesis is concerned is that they have been associated with the fairy folk for centuries. Robert Dawson has written about the similarities between fairies and the stories of Gypsies of the Early Modern period, stating that often persecuted Gypsies were mistaken for fairies (and vice versa). This is largely because they tended to live in secluded spaces, such as woodland, in order to avoid notice.<sup>67</sup> Some GRT traditions encourage a belief in their descent from ancient peoples with fairy powers or gifts. The tradition of humans having fairy powers largely died out in the Early Modern period when, again, supernatural abilities came to be seen as demonic. Consequently, there was a transition from the human connection to a wholly supernatural one, where witches and fairies are not considered human at all, but demons. With the GRT communities already marginalised and heavily persecuted, the suspicion of at the very least supernatural dealings with demons, or perhaps even being manifestations of the demonic, it is unsurprising that they were (still are) othered because of fairy links attributed to them. They were, in short, identified with fairy culture. There are still some members of the communities who trade on this identification, in that they go out and

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<sup>66</sup> D. Purkiss, op. cit., p.1

<sup>67</sup> R. Dawson, *Gypsies and Fairies: Evidence for a Theory* (Blackwell: Robert Dawson, 2002)

about in city centres, selling charms, lucky heather and offering fortune telling, and there still resides in the collective memory of many that GRT people have some supernatural abilities. Even the tradition of seaside fortune tellers are still going strong at the end of the pier or at least online. And these have also given way to animatronic figures in amusement arcades up and down the coast that will 'tell' your fortune. I made some enquiries via social media to the GRT communities in Morecambe, asking if anyone would be willing to talk about fairies. I received two replies. One told me that it would be unlikely for anyone to speak to me as the communities had been let down in the past by academics doing studies of them. The second reply told me in no uncertain terms that I should lay off studying the fairies at all, even mentioning them, as they did not like being talked about and that they would punish me with bad luck if I continued my research. There is no doubt at least in that quarter of the country that fairy belief is still strong and taken very seriously indeed.

### **The Romantic Period**

The seventeenth century saw a falling off of the popularity of fairies in popular culture, enough for Briggs to say that, 'if it had not been for Blake, we would have little to say about fairies at that time.'<sup>68</sup> But she also goes on to say that they really only fade for a while, and begin to resurge at the beginning of the eighteenth century thanks at first to the poetry of Thomas Tickell. Tickell's fairies are small, about the size of a domestic cat, and possess some of the same traits we have seen in the Medieval past. They are tricksters, they steal away children and leave changelings, they are closely allied with the human royalty and nobility, and above all, the fairy king Oberon continues in his story here.<sup>69</sup> The poem is set in Kensington Gardens, the same place where, in the twentieth century, J. M. Barrie sets Peter Pan, the kidnapping sprite from Neverland who never grows up.<sup>70</sup>

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<sup>68</sup> K. Briggs, op. cit., p.183

<sup>69</sup> Ibid., pp.183-187

<sup>70</sup> J. M. Barrie, Peter Pan in Kensington Gardens, Hodder and Stoughton, 1906

From every region to his palace-gate  
 Came peers and princes of the fairy state,  
 Who, rank'd in council round the sacred shade,  
 Their monarch's will and great behests obey'd.  
 From Thames' fair banks, by lofty towers adorn'd,  
 With loads of plunder oft his chiefs return'd:  
 Hence in proud robes, and colours bright and gay,  
 Shone every knight and every lovely fay.<sup>71</sup>

A few years prior to Tickell, Alexander Pope had written about 'Sylphs' in *The Rape of the Lock* (initially published in 1712) seemingly returning fairy discourse to the classical era. Pope's definition of the Sylphs is closer to that of elementals and also gives them wings: 'some to the sun their Insect Wings unfold, /waft on the Breeze, or sink in clouds of Gold.'<sup>72</sup> Briggs cites this as the clearest introduction of winged elemental beings which go on to become the absolute definition of fairies in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Blake also painted some fairies with butterfly wings. After having had an encounter in his own garden, of a fairy funeral.<sup>73</sup> Blake describes it thusly, 'I saw the broad leaf of a flower move, and underneath I saw a procession of creatures, of the size and colour of green and grey grasshoppers, bearing a body laid out on a rose leaf, which they buried with songs and then disappeared.'<sup>74</sup> Blake apparently believed fairies to be representative of 'natural erotic impulses' pushing back against the Enlightenment and Neoclassicism.<sup>75</sup> And also for Blake, as seen in his most famous paintings, fairies are 'rulers of the vegetable world.'<sup>76</sup> He describes them as 'organised and minutely articulated beyond all that the mortal and perishing nature can produce.'<sup>77</sup> This sounds like a precursor to

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<sup>71</sup> T. Tickell, extract from Kensington Gardens, 1722

<sup>72</sup> A. Pope, *The Rape of the Lock*, 1712

<sup>73</sup> K. Briggs, op. cit., p.189

<sup>74</sup> *ibid.*, p.197

<sup>75</sup> *Ibid.*, p.198

<sup>76</sup> J. Kruse, "Full of Fairy elves"- William Blake and fairies, in *British Fairies*,

<https://britishfairies.wordpress.com/2016/10/>

<sup>77</sup> *ibid*

the later fairy belief propounded by Spiritualists and above all Theosophists, principally Geoffrey Hodson, who believed that fairies were ‘the drivers of the natural world.’<sup>78</sup>

Sir Walter Scott appears at the forefront of the revival of interest in fairies and fairy folklore in the late eighteenth, early nineteenth centuries, inspired by Kirk’s pamphlet which became popular at the time, and was reprinted and written about many times.<sup>79</sup> Scott’s collection of letters is quite a detailed summary of much of British folklore and supernatural belief, including fairies, though he does not appear to be convinced of the reality of fairy existence at the start of his studies. According to Silver, he believed fairies were a literary invention, based on folktales and mythologies from across the globe, but he goes back and forth, in a kind of *X-Files* Mulder-esque limbo of wanting to believe, ‘never quite deny[ing] the “abstract possibility” that such phenomena as “apparitions” existed.’<sup>80</sup> Scott’s interpretation of fairies is truly Romantic, as reflected in the characters of his writing. He tends to favour the fairy enchantresses for his heroes, but also has dwarves, changelings, and undines in his works.<sup>81</sup>

Foundational to fairy belief in the Victorian Era is the popularity of collection of folklore and folktales going on across Europe and spreading to England and Wales.<sup>82</sup> This is the era of the Brothers Grimm, of Thomas Keightley, as well as Scott and also Robert Southey, who ‘lean[ed] to belief’ in fairies.<sup>83</sup> Southey based his theory of the origins of fairies upon fleeing Druids, ‘who [hid] in underground dwellings topped by artificial mounds, [giving] rise to a set of traits later

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<sup>78</sup> G. Hodson, *Fairies at Work and Play*, Quest Books, 1925, pp.15-20

<sup>79</sup> D. Purkiss, *op.cit.*, p.185

<sup>80</sup> C. G. Silver, *Strange and Secret Peoples*, *op. cit.*, p.11

<sup>81</sup> *ibid.*, p. 11- 12

<sup>82</sup> *ibid*

<sup>83</sup> C. Silver, *On the Origin of Fairies: Victorians, Romantics, and Folk Belief*, *Browning Institute Studies* Vol. 14, *The Victorian Threshold* (1986), pp. 141-156), Cambridge University Press

ascribed to the fairies.<sup>84</sup> Southey encouraged the folklorist Anna Bray who collected the stories of Devonshire and Cornwall pixies.<sup>85</sup>

Shelley and Keats, those stalwarts of Romantic culture and sensibilities of course cannot be left out. Shelley writes of Queen Mab, the fairy mentioned by Shakespeare in *Romeo and Juliet*,<sup>86</sup> describing her as possessing an 'ethereal' quality: 'The fairy's frame was slight; yon fibrous cloud, /That catches but the palest tinge of even,/And which the straining eye can hardly seize'.<sup>87</sup> Keat's *La Belle Dame sans Merci* returns us to the chivalric tradition, with a Knight beguiled on a lonely path by a fay.<sup>88</sup>

So, it is the Romantic period, in art, literature and in scholarship that is the most responsible for establishing the kinds of fairies that go on to populate folklore, folktales and sightings throughout the Victorian Era and into the twentieth century, before Theosophy instigates another change in fairy belief. The fairies of this period, and their continuations, move away from the courtly fairies of the Medieval and Early Modern period, taking on a more rustic and rural appearance and behaviour, following on more from the 'Little People', who have continued on from Anglo-Saxon elves, to Portunes and to pucks, to Brownies and Hobs, establishing themselves as the diminutive creatures who accosted folk on solitary paths, got up to mischief in farmyards, or helped out in the harvests, and in the kitchens... p.209

## Victorian

The nineteenth and early twentieth centuries are often seen as a culturally rich and influential period in British history. It encompasses the Industrial Revolution, Darwinism, the telephone; it

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<sup>84</sup> Ibid., 141-156

<sup>85</sup> Ibid., p.141-156

<sup>86</sup> W. Shakespeare, *Romeo and Juliet*, Act I Scene 4

<sup>87</sup> K. Briggs, op. cit., p.209

<sup>88</sup> Ibid p.209

is the heyday of the novel: Dickens, Thackeray, the Brontes, Eliot, Hardy, to name but a very few; it is the zenith of Empire, the birthplace of non-conformist religion, and also social and political reform. It is also an important influence on fairy belief, imprinting upon it some of the most important fairy traits and traditions that we take for granted today. 'Victorian Values' particularly of morality and creativity place their mark upon the fairies and shape them into something vastly different from the Anglo-Saxon elves, the courtly fays, and the frog eating Portunes.

While the Romantics centred their fairy belief on the rural, bucolic and rustic, Purkiss emphasises the Victorian penchant and talent for spectacle. With technological innovations that Shakespeare could only have dreamed of, theatre became even more transformative than it ever hoped to be, thanks largely to mechanisation and electricity.<sup>89</sup> This is the era of light, literally illuminating and transforming fairies from the rarely seen to glorious and radiant creatures, at least on the Victorian stage. For example, the Victorians invented fairy lights and coined the term, and we have been using them with great abundance ever since.<sup>90</sup> Examples from some of the lit-up fairies include the 'fairy Do-Nothing [who] was gorgeously dressed with a wreath of flaming gas around her head,'<sup>91</sup> the 'fairies of the Valley of Jewels [who] carried white wands surmounted by capital letters in copper, spelling out the names of jewels in words of blazing light,'<sup>92</sup> and 'tiny electric lights powered by batteries sparkled in the hair, among the floral ornaments and on the costumes of female dancers.'<sup>93</sup>

Another aspect of Victorian culture that Purkiss highlights as an influence on the nature of fairy belief is the cult of the child and childhood. According to her, 'the Victorians took up the

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<sup>89</sup> D. Purkiss, *Troublesome Things*, 2000, op. cit., p.226-227

<sup>90</sup> Sara Walker, Professor of Energy, Newcastle University, 2017

<sup>91</sup> C. Sinclair, *Holiday House*, William Whyte and Co., 1839, p.

<sup>92</sup> *Harlequin and Sinbad the Sailor*, 1881

<sup>93</sup> D. Purkiss, op. cit., p.227



Romantic notion of the child as the perfect innocent and limited that innocent child with fairies.’<sup>94</sup> This was represented in Victorian art, literature and performance by depicting fairies as children, using child models and performers to emphasise this. Alongside the magnificent mechanical and electrical contraptions and light displays were, as Purkiss puts it, ‘hundreds of girls...There were about 1,000 such children in London every Christmas, and 5,000 or so nationwide.’<sup>95</sup> The Victorians perhaps did not notice, or otherwise ignored, at least for the middle part of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the cognitive dissonance of constructing children and childhood as innocent and perfect, at the same time that actual children were employed in dangerous and life-threatening industries. Children as young as nine worked for a pittance in what Blake called the ‘dark, Satanic Mills’ of England and, until 1840, children as young as five were employed in coal mines and in agriculture. Even the fairy actors were ‘aged between seven and twelve years’<sup>96</sup> and were wage earners. No idyllic childhood in a wood full of real fairies for them. The separate, innocent childhood sphere was not for the likes of these hardworking children, for whom work (often dangerous and subject to long hours) was seen as saving them from life of the ‘street-Arab’: ‘Work, regular work and the obligations it brought with it could be the saviour of such savages.’<sup>97</sup> Like most things, then as now, childhood innocence was for the middle and upper class children, whose families had the material resources to create it for them.

One of the most iconic and memorable literary creations of the time, is Christina Rossetti’s *Goblin Market*. It is based upon Milton’s *Comus* and is a clearly moralistic text, not really about fairies at all, but using fairy belief (in this case goblins, heavily influenced by Grimm’s fairy tales, popular at the time). Rossetti was a devout Christian and her poetry reflects this; she is the writer of *In the Bleak Midwinter*, a Christmas Carol still well-loved and sung today.<sup>98</sup> *Goblin*

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<sup>94</sup> Ibid., p.225

<sup>95</sup> Ibid., p.227

<sup>96</sup> Ibid., p.227

<sup>97</sup> Ibid., p.228

<sup>98</sup> J. Marsh, *A Life of Christina Rossetti*, Viking Adult, 1995

*Market* employs some traditional fairy tropes, such as: the dangers of accepting fairy food; the inability of some humans to see the fairies; and fairies being or becoming the downfall of a human through cruelty or mischievous acts.<sup>99</sup> The language of *Goblin Market* is evocative of ideas of the supernatural. The Goblins themselves are described as animalistic:

One had a cat's face,  
One whisk'd a tail,  
One tramp'd at a rat's pace,  
One crawl'd like a snail,  
One like a wombat prowl'd obtuse and furry,  
One like a ratel tumbled hurry skurry.  
She heard a voice like voice of doves  
Cooing all together...<sup>100</sup>

Purkiss' thesis on this particular poem combines her notions of fairy belief, morality, childhood and growing up.<sup>101</sup> It is a fiercely moral tale about sexuality, temptation, and familial love, but using the fairy subset of goblins as a metaphor for these things is telling; fairy belief in the Victorian period is strong enough and popular enough to be incorporated into literary culture. As in the Medieval period and the power of the Church, fairies are co-opted into a 'so-called' higher culture because they have not been discarded from the popular imagination.

One of the most infamous inmates of the Bethlem Royal Hospital, commonly known as 'Bedlam', the 'lunatic asylum' was Richard Dadd, who was admitted, probably with paranoid schizophrenia, after murdering his father and attempting to murder a passenger on a ship he was travelling on across the English Channel.<sup>102</sup> His painting, 'The Fairy Feller's Masterstroke'

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<sup>99</sup> D. Purkiss, op. cit., p.239

<sup>100</sup> C. Rossetti, *Goblin Market*, 1862

<sup>101</sup> D. Purkiss, op. cit., pp.239-240

<sup>102</sup> P. Allderidge, Richard Dadd, 1974, p.9-15

(1864) is one of the most well-known fairy paintings, although it does not necessarily represent fairies in the way that Victorian culture was interpreting them. Dadd professed to have seen them and painted them several times.<sup>103</sup> Its illustration as fairies in a variety of guises, including the animalistic, and costumes from an earlier era, or from other countries, harks back to the Romantic descriptions of fairies, rather than the twinkly lights that were becoming popular around him.<sup>104</sup>

Both Purkiss and Carole Silver write about the changeling as an important part of fairy belief, that came from the Early Modern period but became a feature of Victorian fairy culture. To any age, the loss of a child either to death or disappearance would always be a fount of great anguish. And with disease and death so prevalent, especially that of the young, it is no surprise that a large amount of folklore would also spring up around it. The Church of course would be playing an important role around such tragedies as well; factoring in the Victorian preoccupation with morality, the changeling narrative might seem preferable to a more physiological explanation.<sup>105</sup> Changelings crop up in newspaper reports as well as literature, both fuelling each other, no doubt, along with eager folklorists who collected hundreds of accounts of fairy substitutions, spread by journalists in the popular and respectable press.<sup>106</sup> The changeling narrative reveals much about societal attitudes to the three major groups concerned: the changeling themselves, the family or close relatives or friends, and the fairies. The changeling is always marked with a deformity of some kind, mental, physical, physiological, even imagined. Always an undesirable, unwanted entity, the changeling is perceived as 'changed' by the people closest to the 'stolen' human. It is the perceived change that provides the evidence to all that an unwanted fairy exchange has taken place.<sup>107</sup> The perception that the

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<sup>103</sup> Ibid., p.15-16

<sup>104</sup> D. Purkiss, op. cit., p.250

<sup>105</sup> C. Silver, op. cit., p.59

<sup>106</sup> Ibid., p.60

<sup>107</sup> Ibid., p. 60-61

family and friends hold such beliefs so deeply and that no amount of reasoning or secondary explanations could convince them that their child (predominantly) or other family member had been stolen away and replaced with a malformed fairy doppelganger is striking. As is demonstrable in many cases of the time, the family and friends are driven to astonishing acts of violence and cruelty on the basis of this kind of fairy belief. The changeling narrative was also a convenient excuse for domestic abuse and it shows the fairies to be in need of humans.<sup>108</sup> Silver gives various reasons for this: because fairies cannot give birth easily, because human stock can strengthen weak and ailing fairy stock, because humans are desirable to fairies as they are different (in the Victorian imagination, the fairies would of course prefer white humans, fair and pink skinned as opposed to dark or otherwise not white colouring, in the tradition of general racial purity concerns of the time), or also, the belief that goes back to the Medieval period, of the tithe fairies have to pay to the Devil as his tenants.<sup>109</sup> Above all, however, Victorian feelings about race, class, illness, disability, are closely reflected in the changeling narrative. The prevalent view that God ‘has ordered [the] estate’<sup>110</sup> of everyone accordingly sought to maintain social restrictions. Anyone who deviated from the ‘norm,’ emerged as an ‘other,’ and for some, assigning a supernatural aspect somehow shifted the blame away from human society. Along with the Victorian obsession with changelings, there are accounts of fairy brides, where a human bride is stolen away and replaced, and of course, a more shameful aspect of Victorian culture, the freak shows, where people with rare medical conditions and disabilities, especially (and infamously) dwarfism, indigenous peoples, African Pygmies and others, were described as fairies or fairy folk.<sup>111</sup>

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<sup>108</sup> Ibid., p.62-64

<sup>109</sup> Ibid., p.73

<sup>110</sup> the ‘lost’ verse of the hymn ‘All things bright and beautiful’ in full: ‘the rich man in his castle, the poor man at his gate, God made them high and lowly, and ordered their estate.’ Cecil Frances Alexander, 1848

<sup>111</sup> Silver, op. cit. p.8: Purkiss, op. cit., p.194

When writing about the Victorians, Silver argues that ‘the cultural preoccupation with the secret kingdom of the fairies is a hallmark of the era.’<sup>112</sup> Moreover, there was a surge in interest and research into fairy origins during that century, as well as the art and literature that tell the old stories, and the fascination with the occult and supernatural. All in all, the great desire of the Victorian period was to advance, in knowledge, in science and technology, in discovery, in everything. Fairy belief, far from being consigned to the anachronistic past, is subjected to the same scrutiny as any cultural object of the time, modified accordingly, and as Victoria’s reign came to an end and the century turned, the fairies moved into the twentieth century changed, but just as popular as ever.

### **The Twentieth Century**

J. M. Barrie eases us into the twentieth century with his arguably problematic take on childhood and fairies. Neverland is the epitome of the rarified childhood sphere created by Victorian thought, a place of adventure and almost eternal play, but it is not the right place for the human children, Wendy, or her brothers, in the end. Even before war and pandemic rendered the desire for enchantment as being almost obligatory, Barrie caught the imagination of a public, still desirous for the childhood idyll. According to Richard Sugg, there were fewer children at the early performances of *Peter Pan* than would be expected at such a spectacle. Barrie understood this, as he notes in his prompt book that it was important to ‘remember that every person in the audience is a child.’<sup>113</sup> I said problematic, earlier, because, inadvertently, perhaps, the play more sought to shatter the illusion of an eternal childhood idyll, than endorse it. However, what it also confirmed, according to Sugg and quoting the *Daily Mail* of 1925, wondering, ‘either we are a nation of hypocrites, or we have a secret belief in the supernatural, for the torrent of handclapping which came to the rescue of the expiring Tinkerbell was so

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<sup>112</sup> *ibid.*, p. 3

<sup>113</sup> R. Sugg, *Fairies: A Dangerous History*, Reaktion Books, 2018 p.204

overwhelming that even Peter seemed surprised.<sup>114</sup> In fact, Sugg goes further, to show how the scene and the audience's applause empowers the children (and the adults) to bring the supernatural back to life.<sup>115</sup>

Fairy belief in England underwent a sea change with the involvement of Spiritualists and Theosophists where mediums were regularly seeing fairies through clairvoyant means. An excellent example of this approach in the early twentieth century, is that of Geoffrey Hodson. A Theosophist, he had many encounters with many different kinds of fairies while in a clairvoyant trance. He saw the popular winged creatures which he called, 'the true fairy',<sup>116</sup> and which are described as female, beautiful and good-natured, mostly occupied with dancing in the air or close to the ground.<sup>117</sup> He also classified another type of fairy, close to Kirk's description, but different from his 'true' fairies, as 'sylphs', who are 'lesser fairies... nature spirits which appear to be connected with wind, cloud and storm.'<sup>118</sup> Hodson saw many other types of fairies which he classifies as brownies and elves, gnomes, mannikins, undines and sea spirits and devas.<sup>119</sup> Some of his classifications stray from traditional British fairies to classical literature and Indian folklore. But some of his creatures, the brownies, elves, gnomes and mannikins are little men with human like appearance and clothing, but often distorted and strange features, such as narrow eyes, dark or unusually coloured skin, longer than normal limbs, fingers and feet, pointed ears and noses and even sharp pointed heads in some cases.<sup>120</sup> Hodson almost always saw his fairies in groups, working together. Some recent encounters of the twenty-first century have seen fairies similar in type to these descriptions, and some new ones: a blue, froglike man clinging to a tree, a translucent fairy woman as tall as a human, a tall treelike being walking

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<sup>114</sup> Ibid., p.204

<sup>115</sup> Ibid., p.207

<sup>116</sup> G. Hodson, *Fairies at Work and Play*, op. cit., p.74

<sup>117</sup> Ibid., pp.74-82

<sup>118</sup> Ibid., p.83

<sup>119</sup> Ibid., p.7

<sup>120</sup> Ibid., p.7

slowly down an urban street.<sup>121</sup> While these descriptions are many and varied, they all have common similarities to them, linking them all to fairies.

Interestingly, Hodson was photographed while viewing fairies at Cottingley beck in 1920s. He was visiting Elsie Wright and Frances Griffiths, the notorious Cottingley fairy photographers.<sup>122</sup> Perhaps Theosophy's biggest coup and eventually, biggest disappointment, was the case of the Cottingley fairies, where two local mill girls claimed to have photographed the fairies that they often saw down by their local beck.<sup>123</sup> These photographs came at an interesting time of social, political and cultural change, towards the end of the First World War, and during a global flu pandemic. And there was the intervention of Sir Arthur Conan Doyle, amongst others, a devout Spiritualist and Theosophist, who fastened on to the photos with enthusiasm,<sup>124</sup> as a final proof of all he believed in. The girls became briefly famous and were feted for several years, and the little, non-descript village of Cottingley on the outskirts of Bradford became quite popular. Finally, in the 1980s, first Elsie, the elder of the two cousins, and possibly the more sceptical in her adult life, admitted that it had all been a trick, set up to cheer up the younger cousin, Frances, who was homesick for her father and her home in South Africa. Frances eventually also owned up to the fraud, though she maintained to her death that she really had seen the fairies, but they proved too elusive to be captured on camera.<sup>125</sup> There is no doubt that Cottingley spurred on a stronger belief in fairies among the growing neo-pagan community at least, if not also in general popular culture, for a large part of the twentieth century, and to those that believed, it must have come as a blow to discover it had all been faked.

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<sup>121</sup> S. Young, *The Fairy Census*, vol. i op cit.

<sup>122</sup> J. Cooper, *The Case of the Cottingley Fairies*, Pocket Books, 1998, p.9

<sup>123</sup> *ibid.*, pp.15-17

<sup>124</sup> A. C. Doyle, *The Coming of the Fairies*, Hodder and Stoughton, 1922, p.1

<sup>125</sup> J. Cooper, *op. cit.*, pp.168-170

While folkloric fairy belief never truly went away, popular culture largely takes over and shapes at least the popular understanding of fairies. In the twenty-first century, Purkiss is not optimistic at all about post war and late twentieth century fairies. She sees the transfer of fairies from 'page to screen' as reducing them to a kind of synthetic template, which bears no resemblance to the 'fantasy fairies of the Middle Ages and the Renaissance, [they lack] resonance.'<sup>126</sup> She says this inherently throughout her chapter on the twentieth century, but in particular about those who come forward to describe their own experiences with encountering fairies. She calls this account from Scotland in 1936 and those that come after as 'sad longing' and accuses the participants of 'dress[ing]themselves in the fading haberdashery of Victorian nurseries':

Tramping near Loch Rannoch I was attracted by tuneful tones coming from clumps of rhododendrons, and advancing cautiously beheld the most beautiful dancing. I was too interested to count the number of fairies, concentrating on how close I could get. When I was within ten paces of them, one sighted me and alarming the dancers she shepherded them in among the bushes. I shall never forget the glance she gave me as she disappeared, and the gesture, the grace of her exit, I have seen approached only by the incomparable Pavlova herself.'<sup>127</sup>

I think this encounter and many of the others recorded in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries are just as valid as any recounted in earlier ages. The very nature of the encounter is continuous with earlier accounts, although modified in a number of respects. There are numerous stories of people going out for a country walk in beautiful countryside and finding, not rare wildlife, but dancing fairies! How could the experiencer not be completely transported? I cannot agree with Purkiss's assertion that fairies 'never found a place in modernism; indeed, [they] represented pretty strenuously everything Modernism was against'.<sup>128</sup> On the contrary, fairies can be seen everywhere in Modernism, in art and in design, they are the symbol of Rolls

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<sup>126</sup> D. Purkiss, op. cit., 305

<sup>127</sup> Ibid., p.304-305

<sup>128</sup> Ibid., p.304



Royce cars, they are the sleek and androgynous figures in Art Deco, they are found in ballet, like *Les Sylphides*, and they are most beautifully rendered in the illustrations of Arthur Rackham, and the stories of J. R. R. Tolkien and Enid Blyton (arguably the most prolific children's author of the twentieth century, and still in print). Even Disney, far from killing off fairies, revives them and celebrates them, and recently has brought to our Western attention the fairies and fairy-like beings from other cultures, in films like *Moana* and *Encanto*. Purkiss's examples of the death of fairies through the work/s of creators like Marion Zimmer Bradley, Disney, and Cicely Mary Barker (Purkiss has to add a disclaimer in her critique of flower fairies that she is not calling fans of these images 'paedophiles,' which she very much comes close to doing<sup>129</sup>), may be easy pickings, but I believe are founded in snobbery towards popular culture.

As I will discuss later in this thesis, there are in every age, attempts to belittle and discard fairy belief as unintellectual, largely because they are loved by 'the people.' Then, there emerges a gatekeeping class of people, usually some folklorists, researchers, historians, who want to take away from vernacular or popular culture the fairy belief that mostly originated there, and then restrict it. The Church does it by trying to demonise fairies, even sentencing people to death for believing in anything not 'Christian,' but the intellectual class also tries to either belittle or to sanitise fairy belief, as we have seen in the Victorian period, or to belittle the class that believes in them, as we can see with Cottingley. In her chapter of an otherwise worthy work, Purkiss seems to be doing just that. It may be true, that certain powerful drivers of culture (and popular culture is always seen as something lesser, as Purkiss says, the Victorians have 'banished' the fairies from 'high culture.'<sup>130</sup> But have they? Or were they ever a part of high culture in the first place?) seek to exploit the popularity of a particular cultural entity, and commoditise it, but I would argue that the people turning their noses up at Disney et al are throwing the baby out with

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<sup>129</sup> Ibid., p.310

<sup>130</sup> Ibid., p.284

the bath water. Fairies in any part of history but perhaps even more so in the twentieth and twenty-first century culture reflect the culture around them.

In the popular imagination of the twenty-first century, fairies continue to be described as small be-winged creatures, beautiful and feminine. Art, literature and now cinema design the fairies that most people take for granted. In the Disney film (*Peter Pan*, 1953) Tinkerbell is given proper definition and becomes the iconic fairy that most people know and love. Disney also creates other fairies in *Fantasia*, *Sleeping Beauty*, and fairy like beings in *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs*. All of which have become household images. Cicely Mary Barker had great success with her flower fairies, again iconic images that have endured to the present. The estate of the late artist has recently celebrated the hundredth anniversary of her books. The Fairy Investigation Society, collecting accounts of fairy encounters, continues in the background, throughout the later decades of the twentieth century, thanks to the secretary of the Society, Marjorie Johnson, who kept records of all of the many fairy encounters sent to her. Fairy belief continues to develop as a spiritual practice too. But fairy belief is largely to be found in the children's section, in terms of stories, artworks, cartoons and dressing up costumes. By the end of the twentieth century, fairy wings are fully established, as are wands and tiaras, borrowed no doubt from the ballet.

### **The Wollaton Gnomes**

The circumstances of the Wollaton Gnomes encounter from 1979 which took place in Nottingham, have similarities with the Cottingley fairy fraud, and nicely bookends the twentieth century history of fairy belief and fairy encounters. While these fairy-like beings (described as 'gnomes' which, like elves, sprites, pixies, etc., have become a subset of the generic term 'fairies') were not photographed, their representation involved children who encountered them, adults who interrogated the children and fairy folklorist, Marjorie Johnson of the Fairy

Investigation Society, who believed them. The whole incident was recorded and reported upon in local and national media. The event took place in the park of an Elizabethan mansion, Wollaton Hall, on a Sunday night in September, just at the Autumn equinox, which may be relevant. Several ('half a dozen') children were 'approached by thirty small cars each with a gnome driver and passenger. Things got stranger from there, and the children eventually ran from the park to escape their gnome pursuers.'<sup>131</sup> Simon Young writes that there have been group encounters recorded in and around the same place, but none as 'exceptionally well documented' as Wollaton.<sup>132</sup> The first thing that most people would pick up on, both when hearing the story, and also in seeing the pictures that some of the children drew is that this is Noddy, Enid Blyton's taxi driving wooden doll who runs away from his woodcarver (reminiscent of Pinocchio). Books about Noddy's adventures were published in the 1950s and 60s and continued to be in print throughout the 1970s. It would not be a stretch to suggest that Noddy was as popular for children at that time, as were Peter Rabbit, Rupert the Bear, Toad of Toad Hall, et al, and was also made into a TV series in the 90s and 2000s. Noddy himself is not a fairy-like being, but a toy, but he does live next door to his friend and mentor, Big Ears, who absolutely is a traditional garden gnome living in a toadstool house. Another similarity with Cottingley is that the children involved were 'interviewed' (interrogated might be more appropriate) by their headteacher, Robin Aldrige, the very next day. Now, while I am not suggesting that the story was a lie, (and neither was the Cottingley story, even though the photographs were faked) the minute that an authority figure gets involved, in this case, the children's headmaster, it is possible that the group felt they had to make up their minds to tell or not to tell. The Cottingley girls acted similarly, and agreed in later life that they had felt there was no way they could have confessed to the fraud once they were being written about in the newspapers and books and being visited by eminent Theosophists, and in their case, being

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<sup>131</sup> S. Young (ed.) *The Wollaton Gnomes*, Puca Books and Pamphlets, 2023, p.3

<sup>132</sup> *Ibid.*, p.8

given expensive gifts and regular amounts of money.<sup>133</sup> In the case of the Wollaton gnomes, Aldridge questioned the children quite forensically, and also used leading questions and suggestions to which the children could only respond with a 'yes' or a 'no'.<sup>134</sup> Once the press and the folklore establishment got involved, like Cottingley, the Wollaton children too must have felt that they should stick to their story. There is also a sense of them protecting each other in the transcript of the interview.<sup>135</sup> Being summoned to the Headteacher's office after having been scared. Some orally transmitted folkloric references too, are evident in the accounts: i) the gnomes did not come out of the perimeter of the park; one of the witnesses believed this was because 'they might have died or summat...'<sup>136</sup> ii) The word 'dwarf' is used, an older folklore term for little men.<sup>137</sup> Both before and after the gnomes, there had been accounts of 'little people' being seen in and around the area.<sup>138</sup> Some of these were recorded in the Fairy Investigation Society 'Fairy Census'.<sup>139</sup> Wollaton shows at least three things about fairy belief: (a) it had not died out in both childhood and adult culture; (b) fairies and fairy-like beings reflect and are reflected in the popular culture of the time; (c) adults keep trying to infiltrate and take over the childhood sphere of innocence and imagination, and ultimately ruin it (see Chapter Two and Five). The key difference between the Wollaton encounter and the experience of the Cottingley girls is that not one of the Wollaton child participants has ever come forward to be interviewed. Even the most recent research has not been able to find (or at least find one who will talk), any of the children, now probably in their fifties and sixties, who were there. I will be examining the implications of this and other sightings later on in this thesis, but this discussion establishes three key points: a) fairy belief is strong in children, b) it may reflect or be reflected by surrounding culture, the Noddy character being an example, or garden gnomes, b) that

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<sup>133</sup> J. Cooper, *The Case of the Cottingley fairies*, op. cit., p.194

<sup>134</sup> S. Young, *Wollaton Gnomes*, op. cit., pp.17-34

<sup>135</sup> *Ibid.*, p.28

<sup>136</sup> *Ibid.*, p.25

<sup>137</sup> *Ibid.*, p.21

<sup>138</sup> S. Young, *The Fairy Census*, vol. i, 2017, op. cit., p.124

<sup>139</sup> S. Young (ed), *The Fairy Census 2014 – 2017*, 2017., p.124-127

adults want to believe in as much as, if not more, than the children, and c) the adults' authoritarian or influential interference inevitably sullies the event. Wollaton and Cottingley both passed into obscurity, only revived every so often by academic researchers, folklorists and the like, but the overwhelming factor is that not one of the children in adult life has wanted to talk about it,<sup>140</sup> implying either that it was real for them but the fear of rejection/ridicule silenced them, or they lied about it. Both these implications point towards the presence of fairy belief, either as a childhood trope that does not fit into adulthood, or as a childhood fancy that could be used for effect.

### **The state of fairy culture in Twenty-first century Britain**

For the endurance of fairy scholarship in the twenty-first century, the credit must go to the aforementioned Simon Young, in first resurrecting the defunct Fairy Investigation Society, and also in publishing the fairy encounters collected by Marjorie Johnson, the Society's secretary from its inception in the 1920s until its demise in the 1970s.<sup>141</sup> Young has also set up the Fairy Census which has so far collected over 1000 accounts of encounters worldwide, though with the vast majority within the UK, Ireland and America. Another prolific researcher of fairy encounters is Jo Hickey-Hall who hosts the podcast *Modern Fairy Sightings* and the blog *Scarlett of the Fae* and has interviewed numerous participants who have had real fairy encounters in a positive and non-judgemental way.<sup>142</sup> Other scholars and folklorists continue to collect, publish or broadcast interviews with the many people who encounter fairies to this very day. In recent encounters, as recorded in the Fairy Census, the vast majority of participants have had neutral or positive experiences with the fairies, with only a few feeling a sense of unease, danger or malevolence. One account, recorded in *The Fairy Census*, stands out as particularly menacing though: 'first I used to hear scratching... like a rat or a bird's claws...once

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<sup>140</sup> S. Young, *the Wollaton Gnomes*, op. cit., pp.9-10

<sup>141</sup> M. Johnson, *Seeing Fairies*, Anomalist Books, 2014, pp.3-5

<sup>142</sup> J. Hickey-Hall, *Scarlett of the Fae* [www.scarlettthefae.com](http://www.scarlettthefae.com) op. cit.

I turned off the lights, I could see very small faces appear out of nowhere. The faces changed from happy to angry if you stare, they also approach you if you stare too much...I started to notice them in daylight...I saw them in all the rooms in the house, they like the old fireplace and other nooks and crannies. I also have seen them in the garden as well.’<sup>143</sup> While most of participants mentioned in the census have experienced fairies only once, there are enough to suggest that this is a regular cultural phenomenon, with strong links to a tradition of fairy sightings and fairy belief stretching back through recorded history and beyond.

To conclude, what this historical overview shows, is how fairy belief and fairy encounters have endured over time. In each commonly known era of English history in particular we see what fairies are and what cultural work they are doing. Each era reflects how fairies were understood and how norms and mores of that era influenced that understanding. Fairy beliefs and encounters show how ordinary people connect to a fertile seam of supernatural experience, accessible by anyone, undiminished by time, technology or changing beliefs.

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<sup>143</sup> S. Young, *The Fairy Census*, vol. i, op cit., #52, 2010s, p.72-73



## Chapter Two

### Fairy Folklore

When the first baby laughed for the first time, its laugh broke into a thousand pieces, and they all went skipping about, and that was the beginning of fairies.”

J. M Barrie<sup>1</sup>

You never know how much you really believe anything until its truth or falsehood becomes a matter of life and death to you.

C.S. Lewis<sup>2</sup>

In this chapter, I want to examine some of the theories of the origin of fairies, then, following on from the previous chapter, to look at the development of fairy folklore in England specifically, and then to examine in more detail some of the folklore associated with fairies historically and currently, how it is significant, and also how it may be changing. This backdrop of history and folklore helps to position fairies and fairy belief within it, as significant and influential.

The small nation of England boasts an ethnic and cultural legacy from Scandinavia, Northern Europe, India, the Middle and East Asia, Africa and the Caribbean. The English diaspora can be found in all of those places, and also in Australia, Canada and the USA and the numerous countries of the Commonwealth. This cultural heritage provides the backdrop to this study on folklore, with the people of the country of England having their traditions influenced by the many cultures that came to influence its society over the centuries. And those who left England for the colonies, took their folklore with them and no doubt influenced the fairy-like beings in their new country. And while the momentous historical events of the world were taking place, and the establishment of powerful religion, politics and progress, in the background, largely

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<sup>1</sup> J. M Barrie, Peter Pan, 1904

<sup>2</sup> C.S. Lewis, A Grief Observed, 1960



ignored for many years by those same establishments, folklore was created, developed and practised, throughout the rural then urban communities of England, and the other countries of the British Isles. Sometimes folklore was affected by all of the great historical events, sometimes, folklore sought to influence those same events. And while it is still often disparaged by officialdom, folklore continues to work for change in England and the UK, in the way it always has done, through oral transmission, through protest, through arts and music, through grassroots community building, and lately through the internet. How is folklore important? It creates and drives popular culture, propagating tradition, giving a voice to the great masses of people who live, work and sustain England and the UK. Modern examples of grassroots organising for social change include Methodists, Baptists and Pentecostals, the Labour Party, trades unions, LGBTQ and trans rights and equal marriage, universal suffrage, and also far right organisations such as The National Front, the English Defence League and the British National Party. And lately, thanks to fears about climate change the climate crisis, *Extinction Rebellion*, *Insulate Britain* and *Just Stop Oil*. Folklore has also influenced the Arts, through music, art, drama, dance, poetry and literature, beating back the highbrow arts. According to Ceri Houlbrook, Folklore,

is at once a useful lens, permitting focus and diverse perspectives, and an adaptable tool in the handling of such matters. Stories and customs travel, taken as cultural luggage as people move in and out of communities. And just as folklore is not sedentary, neither is it stable. Practices and beliefs that appear ancient and unchanging are often surprisingly recent inventions, adoptions, or adaptations. Folklore is by necessity fluid – otherwise it would not retain its relevance.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Bastet, T., & Houlbrook, C. (2023). Folklore: Cultural Roadmaps to Creating, Perpetuating, Resolving and Evolving Peace and Conflict. *Peace Review*, 35(2), 187–194

Above all, what has developed alongside the great religions and philosophies imposed upon the people from on high, are the vernacular beliefs, in particular what is often deprecatingly referred to as superstition: the charms, spells, remedies, cures, and especially the stories.

Fairies occupy a peculiar space in belief and spirituality. Unlike the angels and demons, gods and goddesses of the religious world, fairies have no specific religious or spiritual affiliation; they do not do the will of any deities and do not belong to or originate in a particular religious or spiritual tradition. They later get co-opted into religious narratives from time to time, and most recently, into New Age spiritualities.<sup>4</sup> In some medieval writings, fairies are considered to be part of the group of beings that fell from heaven in Lucifer's revolt but did not make it all the way to Hell or found the gates of Hell closed to them.<sup>5</sup> But this only really applies in the Medieval period, and specifically to the Christian tradition. But fairy-like beings exist also in Judaism: the Shedim,<sup>6</sup> and in Islam: the Jinn.<sup>7</sup> There are fairy-like beings in the Hindu belief system: the Apsara and Yaksha,<sup>8</sup> in the Norse tradition: trolls and Huldufolk,<sup>9</sup> and in the Graeco-Roman tradition: nymphs and dryads.<sup>10</sup> There are fairy-like beings in indigenous cultures, such as the Alux in the Yucatan and parts of Central America, originating in Mayan culture,<sup>11</sup> and also the Aziza and Yumboes in Africa.<sup>12</sup> From ancient Persia and later India, there are the Peris,<sup>13</sup> in Chinese culture: the eight immortals, Japanese: the Yosei and other East Asian cultures.<sup>14</sup> In all of these examples of the major human cultures and belief systems of the world, the fairies or

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<sup>4</sup> I have written about these in Chapter 7, Fairy Spirituality

<sup>5</sup> C. S. Lewis, *The Discarded Image*, op. cit., p. 135

<sup>6</sup> J. B. Russell, *The Devil*, Cornell University Press, 1977, p. 215

<sup>7</sup> Madelung W. *The Islamic concept of belief in the 4th/10th century*. Abū l-Lait as-Samarqandī's commentary on Abū Ḥanīfa (died 150/767) al-Fiqh al-absaḍ. Introduction, text and commentary by Hans Daiber. (Studia Culturae Islamicae, 52.) pp. v, 299. Tokyo, Institute for the Study of Languages and Cultures of Asia and Africa (ILCAA), Tokyo University of Foreign Studies, 1995. *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society*. p. 243

<sup>8</sup> Higham, C. (2014). *Encyclopedia of Ancient Asian Civilizations*. N.Y., United States: Facts on File, Inc. p. 24.,

- Singh (2008). *A History of Ancient and Early Medieval India*. New Delhi: Pearson Education. p. 430

<sup>9</sup> Jón Árnason; George E. J. Powell; Eiríkur Magnússon (1866). "Introductory Essay". *Icelandic Legends*, Volume 2. London: Richard Bentley. pp. xlii–lvi

<sup>10</sup> R. Graves, *Greek Myths*, Ch. 86.2; p. 289

<sup>11</sup> S. Pike, *Faery Tale*, 2010, p. 19

<sup>12</sup> Allardice, Pamela. *Myths, Gods & Fantasy*. ABC-CLIO (1991), p. 227

<sup>13</sup> Sherman, Josepha (2008). *Storytelling: An Encyclopedia of Mythology and Folklore*, p. 361

<sup>14</sup> Ibid

fairy-like beings look similar to each other and conduct themselves in similar ways. Most commonly, they are littler than human sized, and this varies from half an inch to under five feet, they live in and sometimes protect natural spaces (usually woodland or forest or waterways), they have supernatural powers, and they make deals with humans, sometimes to aid and sometimes to trick. They are a race apart, from humans and from the other supernatural beings. They are unique in being found everywhere but belonging only to themselves and their realms. And human fascination with fairies and fairy like beings, is as old as humanity; there is not an epoch in human history that is not accompanied by them.

### **Fairy Origins**

Diane Purkiss is keen to dispel some of the myths surrounding the origin of fairies in the British Isles. For instance, she is sceptical about the Neo-pagan belief that the 'Pictish' or Ancient British, a race of small, dark, hunter gatherers, were the origin of the fairies.<sup>15</sup> While there might be some similarities with fairy behaviour: the ability to move unseen, the use of 'elf-shot',<sup>16</sup> their diminutive size, there is very little evidence, Purkiss says, that such a people even existed.<sup>17</sup> While she is quite wrong at least in denying their existence, the time of the Picts (the late Medieval) would make fairies too recent, as they have been documented further back in history.<sup>18</sup> Another popular misconception of fairy origin, Purkiss asserts, is that they are Pagan gods but 'reduced in stature.'<sup>19</sup> She argues that this explanation does not really correlate with the behaviour of fairies in literature and folklore, nor the practice of 'Christianisation' of deities into saints, which was popular across the Holy Roman Empire. Fairies have sometimes been confused with angels (only in appearance – luminous, be-winged – but not in nature, as angels are specifically messengers and servants of God in the Judaic, Christian and Islamic traditions),

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<sup>15</sup> Purkiss, op. cit., p.5

<sup>16</sup> Hall, op. cit., p.7

<sup>17</sup> Purkiss, op. cit., p. 6

<sup>18</sup> Woolf, Alex (2017), "On the nature of the Picts", *The Scottish Historical Review*, 96 (2): 214–217,

<sup>19</sup> D. Purkiss, op. cit., p.7

and equated with demons, given the mischievousness of their behaviour, especially during the period of the persecution of people as witches, but their behaviour does not fit the character of pagan gods and goddesses either.<sup>20</sup> There are strong and entertaining trickster Gods, like Loki and Hermes, but they wield mighty and sometimes, unassailable power. Fairy tricksters employ little more than hustler techniques on their human victims.<sup>21</sup> A boggart cannot be compared to Loki. Purkiss also argues that while fairies are popularly associated with Celtic mythology (again with little foundation, she believes), she is more convinced the origins of fairies lie in ‘the civilisations of Mesopotamia, Egypt, Greece and Rome.’<sup>22</sup> She derives this comparison from tales of baby snatching goddesses and demons, like Lemashtu and Kubu, but the stealing of babies and replacing them with a changeling is only one part of fairy mythology. While there is a resemblance, these are not British fairies. It would seem, just like human evolution, there is a missing link. In the end, Purkiss says, the answer to the question, ‘where do fairies come from?’ is ‘They come from the dark.’<sup>23</sup> Jeremy Harte, on the other hand looks to our pagan past, ‘Scratch the fairy faith’ he asserts, ‘and you will find that it is really a survival of paganism.’<sup>24</sup> While this may be true it does not fully take into account the influence of Christianity which had been around for many generations too and arguably has its own set of superstitions that appear to be pagan, but in fact are not. However, Harte does concede that ‘yes, belief in fairies contains something of the old gods; but it also derives from every other figure in the web of story – from saints, ancestors, fiends, heroes, ghosts, familiars, vampires, angels and anything else that it is possible to be imagined.’<sup>25</sup> Harte gives more credit to story and imagination as the origin, rather than as most might suggest, the other way around.<sup>26</sup> He illustrates this by recounting fairy encounters that occur in different periods and cultures,

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<sup>20</sup> D. Purkiss, op. cit. p.7

<sup>21</sup> D. Purkiss, op. cit., p.7

<sup>22</sup> *ibid.*, p.12

<sup>23</sup> *ibid.*, p.12

<sup>24</sup> J. Harte, *Explore Fairy Traditions*, Heart of Albion Press, 2004, p.23

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, p.23

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, p.23-27

sometimes becoming combined with each other, cropping up in England, in Irish myth, in Wales, with names barely changed, and events modified by surrounding culture.<sup>27</sup> Harte sees a canonical hardening of fairy belief by the 12<sup>th</sup> century, where he sees that ‘people of the British Isles... had created a consistent new body of beliefs about fairies.’<sup>28</sup> This was possible by the number of chroniclers writing and otherwise disseminating the distilled versions of fairies (still called Elves most commonly at this time) that had collected since those rather nebulous ‘pre-Christian’ times that Harte speaks of.<sup>29</sup> In conclusion, he says, similarly to Purkiss in the end, that to search for the origin of fairies is fruitless’ because of ‘how sophisticated the work of creation could be’.<sup>30</sup> Katharine Briggs, rather meticulously focusing on the earliest times fairies are mentioned in written texts, acknowledges that even these writings hark back to a probably imagined and romanticised past, with the likes of the Arthurian legends, where ‘fays’ are the human people with supernatural powers.<sup>31</sup> She further explains how much of fairy myth, ‘from Chaucer’s time onwards, have been supposed to belong to the last generation and to be lost to the present one.’<sup>32</sup> But she also concedes that, ‘the flourishing time of fairy belief must be pushed back to the earliest historic times on these islands, almost to the verge of pre-history.’<sup>33</sup> Carole G. Silver, looking through the oculus of Victorian fairy belief highlights the almost obsession of Victorian researchers and writers with the origins of fairies which she also sees as ‘aided and abetted by developments in sciences and social sciences.’<sup>34</sup> The common belief for some Silver argues was that fairies were being driven out by the Industrial Revolution and mass urbanisation, very similar in fact to the sentiments of Chaucer’s Wife of Bath five hundred years earlier.<sup>35</sup> Driven by nostalgia and imperialism, for the most part, Victorian folklorists needed an

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<sup>27</sup> Ibid., p.27

<sup>28</sup> Ibid., p.26

<sup>29</sup> Ibid., p.27

<sup>30</sup> Ibid., p.27

<sup>31</sup> K. Briggs, *The Fairies in Tradition and Literature*, op. cit., p.3

<sup>32</sup> Ibid., p.3

<sup>33</sup> Ibid., p.4

<sup>34</sup> C. G. Silver, *Strange and Secret Peoples*, 1999, op. cit., p.4

<sup>35</sup> G. Chaucer, *The Wife of Bath’s Prologue and Tale*, Oxford at The Clarendon Press, 1800, p.346

empirical understanding of where fairies came from and when people started to believe in them.<sup>36</sup> We have none, of course, but we do have the stories passed down the centuries, re-imagined in so many ways, through art, literature and the personal experiences of ordinary people. In the end, perhaps like Harte, it is fruitless to seek an origin story, and that the emphasis in fairy study past and present is, what Richard Green states in his Introduction to *Elf Queens and Holy Friars*, ‘to ask what [the fairies] are and what cultural work they are doing.’<sup>37</sup>

What follows next is an exploration of the most popular aspects of fairy folklore. Some of it is as old as can be ascertained, and some is of more recent origin. I have by no means covered every aspect of fairy folklore, but I hope to have given an overview of the traditions and practices of fairy belief in England.

## **Fairyland**

Fairyland, often an underworld in Medieval myth though not exclusively, is one of the oldest aspects of fairy folklore. Entrances are usually physical, via caves, tumuli, barrows, graveyards, and also by stepping into fairy rings.<sup>38</sup> More modern understandings of fairyland largely stemming from Theosophy, also refer to another dimension or ethereal plane that requires clairvoyance to enter. The etymology of Fairyland comes to us from Scots predominantly, where it is commonly known as ‘Elfame’ or ‘Elphame’ because of the association with ‘Elf,’ the most usual name for fairy-like beings until well into the Early Modern period. Some argue that the word ‘fairy’ was first used to describe the land where fairy-like beings came from and was not in use as a nomination of the creature ‘fairy’ until the 1700s.<sup>39</sup> Perhaps as old as the myths of fairyland is the notion of the passage of time there. Some quite early tales recount that one can

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<sup>36</sup> C. G. Silver, op. cit., p.4

<sup>37</sup> R. F. Green, *Elf Queens and Holy Friars*, op. cit., p.12

<sup>38</sup> Briggs, *Vanishing People*, Pantheon Books, 1978, p.18

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*, p.36-37

spend years in an enchanted place, only for a few minutes to have passed in reality. In literature, this is the case in Narnia, when at first, the Pevensies do not believe their youngest sibling Lucy, that she had passed hours asleep in front of the fire in the house of a faun in C. S. Lewis' magical realm, because she had only been gone for a minute.<sup>40</sup> But by far the more popular trope is that a short time spent in fairyland can be many years, even centuries in the human world. Many folktales and accounts demonstrate this. Briggs recounts some of the oldest tales from around the world, of people who accidentally stumble into fairyland, or who are tempted by the sound of music and strange lights, or who are physically carried there by the fairies themselves, though most of these stories come from the Early Modern Period, when fairies were much more dangerous and threatening.<sup>41</sup> In one of Briggs' examples, the victims accidentally step into a fairy ring and disappear for a year, or see a vision of a castle with lights and an open door that their companions do not see and go inside only to be rescued when one of the companions returns a year and a day after the disappearance. One of the longest sojourns in fairyland is the ancient tale of Herla, King of the Britons, told by the Medieval storyteller Walter Map. King Herla went on a ride with an army, only to vanish into fairyland and return two hundred years later after what seemed to them only three days of partying with the fairy folk.<sup>42</sup> An additional part of this and other folklore is how in some of the stories, the long ages catch up with the disappeared once they return to the human world, and they dissolve into dust usually after having only just found out about their terrible fate. In King Herla's case, they were given a dog to carry by the fairy who hosted them but warned that no-one must dismount their horse until the dog had first touched the ground. Some of the company did not heed the warning, got down from their horses and immediately turned to dust. Herla then commanded the rest to remain on their horses, carried the dog and the remaining cohort continued to roam the country before

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<sup>40</sup> C. S. Lewis, *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe*, 1950

<sup>41</sup> R. Sugg, *Fairies, A Dangerous History*, op. cit., p.94-95

<sup>42</sup> K. Briggs, *Vanishing People*, op.cit., p.15-17

finally sinking into the River Wye.<sup>43</sup> What is also interesting about this account is the benevolent attempt of the fairy host to make safe the army's transition back to the human world; if only the fairy had perhaps explained better the consequences, but perhaps it did, but the soldiers did not listen. If you find yourself in fairyland, do not eat or drink while you are there. There will be a penalty to pay: you may have to stay in fairyland forever, or exchange something of value, or you may die.<sup>44</sup> This folklore is reminiscent of the Greek myth of Persephone, who had to stay in Hades for six months of every year because she ate six pomegranate seeds while Hades' prisoner.<sup>45</sup> John Kruse, however, warns against refusing fairy food and drink if you encounter it in the human world. It is a gross insult, and the fairies will take revenge. At best, Kruse recounts the farmer who refused fairy food, and his crops never grew. More usual however, physical pain and death are the most usual form of revenge. As Kruse warns, where the fairies are concerned 'always say yes.'<sup>46</sup> Though you may not get carried off into fairyland itself, some fairies delight in getting people lost, both historically, and in recent times. This phenomenon is called being 'pixey led.'<sup>47</sup> You go out on a familiar walk but get inexplicably lost, you do not recognise any of the features of a usually familiar place, and you either end up in a swamp or fog, or you never find your way back. The most recent example of a human being pixey led was reported in the Irish press and on Twitter in 2022. The woman concerned was carrying out a step challenge and decided to go for a walk in a local wood:

'It was going fine then the path leads through two identical trees. I stepped through and put my hands on both trees. People are saying now that this was a mistake. One was really warm, and the other was really wet and cold. The main path kind of branched off to the left and it just went

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<sup>43</sup> Ibid., p.16

<sup>44</sup> J. Kruse, *The Perils of Fairy Food*, British Fairies, 2020, <https://britishfairies.wordpress.com/2020/02/17/the-perils-of-fairy-food/> accessed June 2025

<sup>45</sup> Apollodorus, *Bibliotheca*, 1.5.3; Ovid, *Metamorphoses*, 5.533-371

<sup>46</sup> J. Kruse, *The Perils of Fairy Food*, op. cit.

<sup>47</sup> R. Cullen, *Woman's terrifying ordeal after hearing fairy voices while stuck in the woods*, on [www.Dublinlive.ie](http://www.Dublinlive.ie), September 2022, accessed September 2024



nowhere... and I thought that this wasn't the main path, and I should have taken the other way. I took the other way and then that similarly went nowhere. I went back to the fork to start over... I walked back up the main path again, but it didn't look familiar. It was quite overcast at this point as well... I decided to keep trying paths. There were only three, so I thought I'd eventually get somewhere. I kept walking down a path towards a really overgrown area again. At that point then, I heard a really light woman's voice. I don't know how to describe it. It was really high. She was shouting 'over here'. I thought she was probably calling to her kids or something. Then she laughed and it was just when she laughed, the hairs on the back of my neck stood up... My first instinct was to run but I didn't even know where to run. I just remember turning your clothes inside out is supposed to help. So, I just tried that... I turned my t-shirt inside out, put it back on. I was hoping nobody was looking at me because it was a really weird thing to do in the middle of a forest. I turned around and walked back and almost immediately came to the two trees again... Then I could hear the birds again and people and stuff... When I got back to the car, I looked at my steps. The last time I had checked my step counter I had done 8,000 steps or something like that. I had put on an extra 10,000 steps.<sup>48</sup>

This story is remarkably similar to accounts recorded centuries ago. The victim seems to have passed through a gateway, the two trees, one feeling hot, the other feeling cold and wet. It is also interesting that she remembered the fairy charm from folktales she had heard about turning your clothes inside out, and that worked for her and is a commonly known charm for any kind of fairy repellent.<sup>49</sup> Stories like these happening today, connect us with our folkloric past. The pixey-led woman says she was 'told that was a mistake' when she says she put her hands on the trees as she went in between them, somehow activating the pixey-led experience, perhaps. The collective memory of folklore and charms is still clearly prevalent today, as it was

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<sup>48</sup> R. Cullen, op. cit.

<sup>49</sup> J. Kruse, If you go down in the woods today – disguises and fairy Magic, British Fairies, 2024

in Medieval times. But the most inexplicable part of the story is that of the scary laughter, and the voice calling out, 'this way.' This is a common occurrence too, in fairy experiences. It recalls the type of fairy from the Anglo-Saxon period, who were rarely if ever seen, and the only evidence that they had been around, was 'elf shot' and some kind of spasmodic sickness in humans or farm animals.<sup>50</sup> It is reminiscent of another experience recounted in the Fairy Census, where two men went for a Boxing Day walk around the countryside near their home. Again, they followed a familiar path, which soon became unfamiliar, and then they heard a disembodied whistle which they tried to follow, getting completely lost. They talked about turning their coats inside out, but it was too cold. After a strange noise that sounded like an animal charging at them, though they saw nothing, they ran across the field and found the path. The next day, they retraced their steps and found everything familiar again.<sup>51</sup>

### **Fairy Royalty**

Fairyland is commonly ruled over by The Fairy Queen, or the Fairy King and Queen together. The Queen seems to be the most popular, and survives into modern accounts of fairy encounters however, some research suggests a separate evolution in the folklore of the Fairy King. Angana Moitra cites the thirteenth century poem 'Sir Orfeo' as a 'retelling of the classical myth of Orpheus'.<sup>52</sup> In this poem she recognises how the depiction of the Fairy King is quite negative, 'a sinister power whose motivations are both ambiguous and inscrutable'.<sup>53</sup> Not two hundred years later, in Shakespeare's play, Oberon, while tricky and petty in his treatment of Titania over the custody of the Indian boy, is 'moved to pity by the plight of lovers'<sup>54</sup> and to all intents and purposes is a force for good representing, Moitra asserts, a complete reversal of the depiction of the fairy King. Most readers will first encounter the fairy King here. The character of Oberon was

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<sup>50</sup> A. Hall, *Elves in Anglo Saxon England*, op cit., p.6-7

<sup>51</sup> S. R. Young, *The Fairy Census*, Vol. I, 2017, ss95, p.114-117

<sup>52</sup> Moitra, Angana (2019) *A Spirit of Another Sort: The Evolution and Transformation of the Fairy King from Medieval Romance to Early Modern Prose, Poetry, and Drama*. Doctor of Philosophy (PhD) thesis, University of Kent, introduction, p.9

<sup>53</sup> Ibid. p.9

<sup>54</sup> Ibid. p.9

based on late Medieval French Literature, most notable in the poem *Huon de Bordeaux*.<sup>55</sup> Fairy Kings are mentioned in earlier Irish folklore, and the figure is there in the medieval texts, but he seems to perhaps take a chess piece role, by being the most important character with the least amount of agency. Moitra correctly implies the demise or lack of focus on the Fairy King as the Church moved towards persecution of witches, and while even the Church acknowledged males as well as females as witchcraft practitioners, the figure of the King of fairies has to take a step back.<sup>56</sup> Moitra, like many in the study of folklore tries to show an origin story link and an evolution of the fairy King, from the classical world of Greco-Roman deities, and it is interesting that he ends up as a comic side character, arguing with his wife over the custody of a child in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*.<sup>57</sup> The fairy Queen becomes the most popular at the same time that 'Gloriana', Queen Elizabeth I is on the throne and stays there for two generations. Edmund Spenser's allegory of Elizabeth I, *The Faerie Queene*, like Shakespeare, draws on earlier Medieval literary tropes about fairies, knights and ladies.<sup>58</sup> In the later Early Modern period, The Fairy Queen, or Queen of Elphame as she is described in Scottish witch trials, begins to become more threatening as fears about witches and demons begin to take hold in the 16<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> centuries.<sup>59</sup> In the *Ballad of Tam Lin*, the fairy Queen wants to pay 'a tithe to hell' with the eponymous human/fairy hero, threatens the fertility and even the life of his rescuer Janet, and wishes she had turned Tam Lin 'into a tree' rather than keep him as her fairy knight.<sup>60</sup> The tithe to Hell comes to us from Scottish tradition, but is mentioned in English folklore too. As 'tenants of the devil' the fairies pay a tithe of human flesh every seven years. They kidnap a human in order to pay it. Tam Lin says this is because humans are 'fair and full of flesh' implying that the demons then dine on this human sacrifice.<sup>61</sup>

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<sup>55</sup> Bouchier, Lord Berners, John (1887). Lee, S.L. (ed.). *The Book of Huon de Bordeaux* (PDF) (Critical ed.). Early English Text Society.

<sup>56</sup> A. Moitra, op. cit.

<sup>57</sup> W. Shakespeare, *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, op. cit.

<sup>58</sup> E. Spenser, *The Faerie Queene*, 1596

<sup>59</sup> E. Wilby, *Cunning Folk and Familiar spirits*, op. cit

<sup>60</sup> Tam Lin Reference Library, [www.Tamlin.org](http://www.Tamlin.org), accessed October 2024

<sup>61</sup> The Ballad of Tam Lin, various, [www.Tamlin.org](http://www.Tamlin.org)

## Types of Fairy

Collectively, fairies are sometimes known as ‘the little people,’ ‘the men in green’ or ‘the fey.’ Fairies do not like being called fairies in their British and Irish tradition. You must call them The Gentry, the Lords and Ladies, The Good people, the Folk, the Good Neighbours, etc. to keep them from harming you. This comes to us from Irish folklore and is still taken very seriously amongst believers.<sup>62</sup> The word ‘fairy’ in modern times is the name commonly given to the usually female, diminutive, winged creature of popular culture, that actually did not come into common usage until the middle to late nineteenth century and was embedded in the human imagination first by late Victorian artists like Atkinson Grimshaw (whose most famous picture of a winged flying creature, often used to illustrate fairy books and exhibitions, was actually entitled ‘Iris’, the Greek goddess of the rainbow), the Cottingley photographs of 1917, Cicely Mary Barker’s flower fairies and Walt Disney cartoons. However, preceding these kinds of fairies are other fairy beings whose names vary regionally and linguistically, most commonly known are the elves, sprites, brownies, pixies, gnomes and goblins, as well as many regional variations of similar beings with similar traits, such as boggarts, hobs and pucks in Northern England and Scotland. Diane Purkiss, however, bases her categorisation of fairy beings on four main behaviour traits: home helps, fairy guides, fairy societies and tricksters.<sup>63</sup> But even these do not cover all of the diverse types encountered in a vast swathe of literature and record. Indeed, it is often difficult to classify fairies by name, type, or behaviour, and many fairy academics try to avoid doing it too formally. Simon Young identifies two schools of thought for the categorisation of fairies: Lumpers and Splitters.<sup>64</sup> He has more sympathy for the likes of Katharine Briggs, a ‘splitter’ who records the hundreds of names of types of fairy, some of which Young believes are the same being but with different names dependent on regional variation. However, he has nothing but contempt for ‘lumpers’ who say that all fairy and fairy like beings

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<sup>62</sup> M. Daimler, *Living Liminality*, [lairbhan.blogspot.com/2020/10/euphemisms-for-fairies](http://lairbhan.blogspot.com/2020/10/euphemisms-for-fairies), accessed October 2024

<sup>63</sup> D. Purkiss, *Troublesome Things* (London: Penguin Books, 2000) p.8

<sup>64</sup> S. Young and C. Woodyard, *Boggart and Banshee Podcast*, 2024, episode

are the same.<sup>65</sup> For the purposes of this thesis, I have classified the fairies into five main groups: (a) invisible, barely or rarely seen, (b) lights, (c) human sized, (d) little people, mostly male, and (e) little be-winged creatures, mostly female. Young calls fairies, ‘magical, living, resident humanoids’<sup>66</sup> and most researchers and believers alike agree they are, broadly speaking, humanoids with supernatural powers. They can move unnaturally fast, appear and disappear, and shapeshift. Supernatural abilities notwithstanding, however, fairies choose to live close to humans, in partnership, or even symbiosis with them, exchanging help, or playing tricks. Though they differ in many other aspects, fairies seem to share at least three common attributes: a) they are luminous or light bearing, b) they look like smaller versions of humans, and c) they carry out imitations of common, domestic and other human activities.

### Fairy Helpers

In the North of England, these fairies are usually known as Brownies or Hobs.<sup>67</sup> Stories range from help in exchange for something, usually food, or shelter, like the story of *the Elves and the Shoemaker* who help a starving shoemaker by making the finest pair of shoes in the land which he sells and is able to buy food. This continues until the shoemaker is rich and the shoemaker and his wife reward the elves with fine clothes and shoes.<sup>68</sup> The help given by a fairy is often for a good deed done, or, as in the case of *Yallery Brown* and other stories of that ilk, to somehow enslave or impoverish someone.<sup>69</sup> Many tales of encounters with this more common type of fairy—the usually male, little people, often described as elderly looking—come from the oral tradition of the rural poor and working classes and have been handed down the generations until being collected by the avid University educated folklorists of the eighteenth and nineteenth

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<sup>65</sup> *ibid*

<sup>66</sup> C. Houlbrook and S. Young (eds.), *We need to talk about Fairies*, in *Magical Folk* (London: Gibson Square, 2018), p.15

<sup>67</sup> K. Briggs, *An Encyclopedia of Fairies*, op. cit., pp.45-49; p.222-223

<sup>68</sup> The Brothers Grimm, *The Elves and the Shoemaker*, Grimm’s fairy tales, 1884

<sup>69</sup> Purkiss, op. cit., p.1

centuries, like Cropper and Keightley. Many of the fairies that accost travellers, labourers, milkmaids and old wives are depicted as homeless, poor and needy. In some instances, they may pose as such to test the empathy of the humans they encounter. But most of the time humans come across them and swap food, shelter or other help for wishes or favours. The human often comes off worst in the exchange. These types of fairies are typically solitary, in pairs, or occasionally in a family group. In Shakespeare's *The Tempest*, Ariel is rescued by Prospero from imprisonment in a tree, and exhibits typical fairy helper traits, and the ability to fly or at least move through the air. Ariel thanks Prospero by becoming his servant.<sup>70</sup> We see another fairy helper in Shakespeare's *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, albeit a less compliant, more of a loose cannon type, in Puck, Oberon's servant and fool.<sup>71</sup> If you thank a fairy when they do you a good turn they will undo all the good work they have done.<sup>72</sup> So the best thing to do is placate them or just keep their good will, leave out food, usually preferred are bread, milk, and honey and beer.<sup>73</sup>

### **Boggarts**

A special mention has to be given to Boggarts, mostly because they are particularly associated with the North of England, and while they possess many fairy traits, they are peculiar when set against the other species of fairy more commonly known. The boggart was made famous in the twenty-first century in J. K. Rowling's third book, *Harry Potter and the Prisoner of Azkaban*, where Rowling appropriated this creature, as she has so many from folklore, and represented its main feature, its ability to shapeshift. Rowling's boggart does not have its own neutral body, but the folklore boggarts are often described as troll like.<sup>74</sup> Rowling's boggart is used by the character Professor Lupin as training for the students on combatting evil magical creatures, as

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<sup>70</sup> W. Shakespeare, *The Tempest*, 1610-11

<sup>71</sup> W. Shakespeare, *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, 1595/6

<sup>72</sup> D. Purkiss, op. cit., p.1

<sup>73</sup> J. Kruse, *A Votaress of My Order: Offerings to Fairies*, 2017, [Britishfairies.wordpress.com](http://Britishfairies.wordpress.com). accessed October 2024

<sup>74</sup> S. Young, *The Boggart*, University of Exeter Press, 2025, p.vii

the boggart can assume the shape of the enemy, but not the danger, most especially, The Dementor, a soul stealing incubus, used to guard the prisoners in the eponymous prison. In both the book and the 2004 film version, the boggart scenes are some of the most entertaining. The boggart crops up again in the fifth book in the series, *Harry Potter and the Order of the Phoenix*. Katharine Briggs describes the boggart in her dictionary as, 'A mischievous BROWNIE, almost exactly like a poltergeist in his habits.' She goes on to recount a well told story collected by a few folklorists, notably 'William Henderson and Keightley'<sup>75</sup> which typifies boggart behaviour:

There was once a Yorkshire farmer called George Gilbertson whose house was much tormented by a boggart. He played his tricks on everyone about the house, and especially on the children. He would snatch away their bread and butter and upset their porringers and shove them into corners and cupboards; and yet not a glimpse of him was ever seen. There was an elf-bore in one of the cupboards, a hole where a knot of wood had been, and one day the youngest boy stuck an old shoehorn into it. It was pushed back so hard that it popped out of the hole and hit him on the forehead. After this the children loved to play with the boggart by thrusting sticks into the hole and seeing them shot back. But the boggart's tricks got worse and worse, and poor Mrs Gilbertson became so anxious for the children that at last they decided to move. On the day of the flitting their nearest neighbour, John Marshall, saw them following their last creaking carts out of the empty yard. 'And so, you're flitting at last, Georgie?' he said. 'Aye, Johnny lad, I'm forced tull it; for that damned boggart torments us so we can neither rest neet nor day for't. It seems to have sech a malice against t' poor bairns that it omost kills my poor dame at thowt on't. And soa ye see we're forced to flit like.' A sudden unexpected echo to his words came in a deep voice out of the old upright churn in the last cart. 'Aye, Johnny lad, we're flitting, ye see.' 'It is the damned boggart!' said George. 'If I'd a knowed thou'd been there I hadn't a stirred a leg. Turn back, Mally,' he said to his wife. 'We mun as well be tormented in t'owd house as in another that's not to our liking.' So back they went; and the boggart played about their farm till he was tired of the sport.<sup>76</sup>

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<sup>75</sup> K. Briggs, *An Encyclopedia of Fairies: Hobgoblins, Brownies, Bogies and Other Supernatural Creatures*, 1976, p.29-30

<sup>76</sup> *Ibid.*, p.30

## Fairies and Angels

Angel magic has an established tradition, originated by the occultist John Dee in the sixteenth century.<sup>77</sup> 'Enochian magic' was further adopted by the '*Hermetic Order of the Golden Dawn*' in the nineteenth century, to which the notorious Aleister Crowley had belonged since almost the beginning and developed the practices of invocation and consultation still used by practitioners today. The conflation of fairies and angels seems to stem from the aforementioned fall of Lucifer story, though there is no explanation for their changed state after their entrapment on Earth, and can only surmise that over time they evolved into smaller, less powerful beings, resembling angels only due to the luminosity for which they are often associated throughout folklore, and the wings. The wings continue to be contentious; the earliest record of wings mentioned is 1712, in Alexander Pope's *The Rape of the Lock*. But fairy wings do not become popular and widespread until well into the Victorian era.<sup>78</sup> Yet now, wings are inseparable from the singular being of 'fairy' which the majority of people identify. Towards the later part of the nineteenth century and beyond, some fairy and angel encounters have overlapped, and some twentieth century sightings have added aliens to the mix.<sup>79</sup> Anything luminescent or be-winged, or both seems subject to this. But fairies do have specific traits which can be used to distinguish them from these others. Angels have a specific religious origin and affiliation, specific tasks and even specific names, at least, the archangels do.<sup>80</sup> Up until the nineteenth century, fairies were not seen as counsellors or wish fulfillers. They were not sought out for help but rather help would be sought to keep them at bay because of their reputation for tricks. But it seems that as Theosophy and Spiritualism became more popular, and the fairies themselves more spirit-like, their propensities for interaction for the good of humans have grown.

Theosophy tends to call fairies 'Devas' in general, then, 'nature spirits, elementals and

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<sup>77</sup> Roberts, R. Julian (25 May 2006). *Dee, John (1527–1609)*". Oxford Dictionary of National Biography

<sup>78</sup> S. Young, *When did fairies get wings? The Paranormal and Popular Culture*, Routledge, 2019, p. 263-269

<sup>79</sup> L. S. Clark, *From Angels to Aliens: Teenagers, the Media and the Supernatural*, 2003, pp.3-23

<sup>80</sup> Chase, Steven (2002). *Angelic spirituality*. p. 264.



fairies.’<sup>81</sup> However, it is still only very recently that we have seen a movement towards consultation of the fairies for the problems of everyday life, in the way that before, angels, the church, and even witches were consulted.<sup>82</sup> For Dora Van Gelder, Angels seem to operate like spiritual ‘district managers’ and confer some kind of spiritual energy on fairies who, in the role of local engineers, then carry out the necessary tasks designed to keep nature going. This seems very structural and organised and in keeping with Theosophy and its hierarchy of beings.<sup>83</sup> It is here that angel and fairy belief conflates, and perhaps it is also where wings become the predominant facet of identification for fairies, and fairies become identified as one sub-species, that is, the ballet dancer with wings, wand and tiara, rather than the collective name for the range of ‘folk’ who populate the fairy realms. Most fairy researchers and practitioners are very quick to deny the sameness or even similarity between angels and fairies, though, as will be explored in a later chapter, the way some practitioners approach fairies now, through meditation, visualisation and oracle cards, seeking and encouraging others to seek counsel and inspiration by connecting with fairies, in the same way that earlier practitioners have connected with angels through angel magic and cards. There is even a version of *Angelic Reiki*, a modern Buddhist healing practice that works through energy transmission, but that invokes the aid of archangels.<sup>84</sup>

### **Kidnappings and Changelings**

The accounts of changeling folklore are quite horrific. They read like a litany of cruelty and abuse, some of it extremely hard to comprehend. To a modern reading, they seem at best, the most terrible ignorance towards mentally and physically disabled children and adults, at worst, fantasist excuses for deliberate cruelty. But changeling narratives are also some of the oldest

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<sup>81</sup> G. Hodson, *The Kingdom of the Gods*, 1952, p.11

<sup>82</sup> *Ibid.*, p.xvii -xviii

<sup>83</sup> D. Van Gelder, *The Real World of Fairies*, Quest Books, 1999, p.8-9

<sup>84</sup> [www.angelicreikiuk.com](http://www.angelicreikiuk.com)

folklore connected to the fairies. From the Medieval period until the twentieth century, many accounts of abductions, but more importantly of replacement of human children and some adults with fairy beings occur throughout folklore and have even been recorded in the national press. MacEdward Leach says that the fairies have four reasons for kidnapping humans: to suckle fairy babies, to save them on the day of Judgement, to pay the tithe to hell, and to have beautiful children to improve the fairy stock.<sup>85</sup> The existence of changelings most supports the idea that fairies are dangerous and need to be kept far away from humans. Most of the time, if the fairies kidnap a child (above all the most popular prey in folklore), but also adults, they leave a doppelganger in their place.<sup>86</sup> This will usually be a replica of the human but may have a sickly or morose personality or even be a lump of wood or a stone disguised with glamour.<sup>87</sup> Then the kidnapped person's family would see the differences and torture the changeling until the fairies brought back their human loved one. This trope was often used to justify domestic abuse, but accounts also show the depth of belief in the changeling's family and community. D. L. Ashliman believes the changeling myth to be one of the oldest fairy myths in folklore, and to be found across Europe, and even in the myths and legends of the Jinn.<sup>88</sup> One of the most written about stories of a changeling, that rocked her community of Ballyvadlea, Tipperary, for many years, was the story of Bridget Cleary, a twenty-six year old woman tortured to death then burned in 1895, for disappearing then returning 'changed'.<sup>89</sup> The 'fairy tale' version, recounted by a neighbour over thirty years later, has all the hallmarks of a fairy abduction story:

There was a woman one time taken by the fairies. She was married. They took [her] away from the husband and left him another old yoke instead of her. The husband was in a terrible way over it, and he didn't know what he had best do to get her back. He went to a fairy man that lived

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<sup>85</sup> M. Leech E. B. "The Teind to Hell in 'Tam Lin.'" *Folklore*, vol. 81, no. 3, 1970, pp. 177–81.

<sup>86</sup> Diane Purkiss, *Troublesome Things*, op. cit., p.156-157

<sup>87</sup> Ibid.

<sup>88</sup> D. L. Ashliman, *Changelings*, sites.pitt.edu, 1997, accessed Jan 2025

<sup>89</sup> A. Bourke, *The Burning of Bridget Cleary*, Penguin, 1999, p.94

somewhere in the County Kilkenny, and he told him his story. The fairy man told him that they [the fairies] would be passing by the end of his house on a certain night and that he'd see them – he gave him some herbs so that he could see them – and that his wife would be riding on a grand grey horse; and when she'd be passing him to seize and hold on to her, that if he missed her he'd never see her again. He came home, and on this certain night he went out to the end of the house, and he was no length there when the fairies came on, and they galloping. He saw the wife on the white horse and the minute she came up to him he grabbed her and held her. He put some herbs he was after getting from the fairy man into her hand, so that she'd stay with him, and begob he had his wife back again. When they went back into the house, the other yoke was gone off with herself.<sup>90</sup>

This was not what actually happened of course, though the farmer did visit a 'fairy doctor' about his wife's 'illness' (she caught a chill while out selling eggs, which laid her up for several days with bronchitis) who gave him the folklore advice still popular at the time. It is also said that the farmer spent several nights out in the fields waiting for his wife and the fairy train to come by so that he could catch her.<sup>91</sup> There is also however, some similarity in earlier beliefs about witchcraft and perhaps demonstrates the conflation of fairy and witchcraft belief, maybe the former hijacking the latter in accordance with the encroaching beliefs of the Early Modern period. But this was centuries after the time of the witch trials and therefore perhaps owes more to the enduring fairy folklore in the area. Bridget was subjected to sustained torture and finally burned and buried in a shallow grave where she was discovered by the authorities. Her death was investigated as murder, and the culprits, her husband, cousins and the 'fairy doctor' were tried as murderers, though convicted of manslaughter in the end, as the magistrates were swayed by the evidence brought containing the accounts of the belief of fairy possession or fairy

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<sup>90</sup> A. Bourke, *The Burning of Bridget Cleary*, 1999. Told by Mrs John Carroll (65), Assegart, Foulksmills, Co. Wexford, December 1937, and written down by Tomás Ó Ciardha (IFC 437: 106–7), p.19

<sup>91</sup> *Ibid.*, p.51

kidnap.<sup>92</sup> To our twenty-first century mentality, we see it for the cruel and controlling crime that it is, however, it would be remiss to completely ignore the folkloric context and the beliefs that were used as the reason and the excuse for such a heinous crime.

### **Charms against Fairies**

Many stories have accompanying charms and spells designed either to placate the fairies or to protect people from them: iron is the most well-known, but also salt and fish, turning your clothes inside out like the aforementioned unwitting victim of pixey leading, crossing running water, the sign of the cross, holding up the Host or sprinkling holy water, hag stones and grabbing hold of tufts of grass.<sup>93</sup> Fairies and iron is a particularly well known and old charm to protect from the fairies, and also to bring good luck, hence the horseshoes over the threshold of old cottages or farmhouses, or in the room where a woman is giving birth, as fairies might steal her, the midwife or the child.<sup>94</sup> King Solomon famously had a ring partly made of iron with which he can control the Jinn.<sup>95</sup> It is our old friend Robert Kirk who repeats this charm, “Iron hinders all the Operations of those that travell in the Intrigues of these hidden Dominions.” But where did it originate? And how did it become so specific to fairies? It seems that folklore surrounding iron as having magical properties dates back to classical times, and iron made from meteorites that pre-dates the Iron age by several centuries seems to help the folklore along.<sup>96</sup> Smiths were seen as possessing magical powers, and one medieval folk tale recounts the devil, in the form of a comely maiden, tries to get the smith to give him access to his skills. The smith concedes but from the devil he gets a concession that if anyone hangs a horseshoe over their door, he, the devil, will leave them alone.<sup>97</sup> The association of iron as a repellent against fairies does not

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<sup>92</sup> Ibid., p.174

<sup>93</sup> J. Kruse, *Fairies Guard Me! Talismans against Faery Folk*, in *British Fairies* (wordpress.com, 2006)

<sup>94</sup> Goshu, Belay & Ridwan, Muhammad. (2025). *Sacred Iron and Celestial Birth: The Science, Culture, and Spirituality of Iron in Childbirth*. 5. 265-281.

<sup>95</sup> Josephus, *Antiquitates Judaicae*, 1<sup>st</sup> century, 8: 41 - 49

<sup>96</sup> Remy Dean, *Ferrous Friend or Foe? How Iron Became the Enemy of Fairy Folk*, *Folklore Thursday*, 2017

<sup>97</sup> *ibid*

seem to have an origin, then, but given that it has a magical history all of its own, it maybe conjectured, that in the hands of humans, it is our best defence. And it is, until well into the nineteenth century, that defence against the fairies was paramount. Maybe it does go back to biblical texts and Solomon's seal, made of brass for the good spirits and iron for the bad spirits. Such stories may have been passed down without provenance. Perhaps it is simply that a metal, representing strength and surrounded by myth and folklore could be used against creatures from myth and folklore, and the sense of power this might have given to humans without supernatural power, but plagued by fairies that possess it, had some way of fighting back. Maybe fairies, associated with wood and natural elements would see iron as the axe head that would cut down their trees and destroy their habitats. It is the metal of weapons after all. The other well-known fairy charm is that of turning your clothes inside out, as we saw with the pixey-led example. There is some superstition about putting clothes on the wrong way, and it being bad luck if you try to rectify it. So, you have to go through your day with your cardigan on the wrong way round or your tee shirt showing its label.<sup>98</sup> Why this practice works, does not attract much comment, but I think it is an act of change, clothes are really important to humans, and so might have an effect on supernatural disruption.

### **Nature Spirits and Elementals**

It seems that the belief that fairies are nature spirits, comes to us from pre-Christian times, as both the Greeks and the Romans believed in spirits that inhabited natural things like trees, rivers and flowers.<sup>99</sup> These Dryads, Naiads and Nymphs were female and dwelt in woods, sometimes as guardians of specific plants or trees. Naiads presided over water: springs, streams, wells and rivers. Fairies have been associated with particular natural places in the British Isles for

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<sup>98</sup> I. Sedgwick, *The Folklore of Clothes, Defying Fairies, Finding Love and Bringing Luck*, 2023, [www.icsedgwick.com/folklore-of-clothes/](http://www.icsedgwick.com/folklore-of-clothes/) accessed July 2025

<sup>99</sup> J. Brouwers, *Satyrs, Sileni, and Fauns: Lustful Graeco-Roman spirits of nature*, 2018, [www.ancientworldmagazine.com/articles/satyrs-sileni-fauns-lustful-graeco-roman-spirits-of-nature/](http://www.ancientworldmagazine.com/articles/satyrs-sileni-fauns-lustful-graeco-roman-spirits-of-nature/)

centuries. In the Middle Ages, Roman remains of temples, mosaics, halls, etc., were popularly believed to be the ruins of fairy habitations, and many hills, barrows, and general tumuli throughout the British Isles are believed to be entrances to Fairyland, or even to be part of Fairyland itself.<sup>100</sup> Woodland is especially associated with fairies, who inhabit them as *genii locorum*, or as seen in the place names throughout the British Isles that have a fairy reference, such as Fairy Glen at Appley Bridge, near Wigan, Fairy Steps at Beetham in Cumbria, or Fairy Hill Park in Greenwich. Anything with *pook*, *puck*, *puca*, *poke* in the name has a fairy association.<sup>101</sup> But that does not mean the fairies are tied to these places, nor that they are only able to be summoned there. While they may still be found in the places named for them, recent accounts of encounters suggest that fairies can be seen anywhere. Though predominantly in the countryside, fairies have also been seen in car parks, back gardens, living rooms, bedrooms, schools, factories, indeed, anywhere that humans are.<sup>102</sup> Robert Ogilvie Crombie, or ‘ROC’ writes about the relationship between plants and the spirits of those plants in *The Findhorn Garden*, a collection of essays by the Findhorn Foundation, a spiritual commune founded in the 1960s in Scotland, and still active today, that used spiritual principles to live and work in ‘co-operation with the spirits and energies of nature.’<sup>103</sup> Crombie sees nature spirits and elementals as the same entity, though as will be observed later on, while in general this may be true, there has been and still is to some extent a particular definition of elementals in the Early Modern writings of Paracelsus, and in some sections of New Age belief.<sup>104</sup> Crombie’s accounts of his meetings with a faun called Kurmos, and also with the God Pan, who on several occasions merges with Crombie’s mind to give him an extensive view of the esoteric spirit world, are delightful, and clearly take their ideas from Theosophy.<sup>105</sup> Kurmos the faun, an archetype from

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<sup>100</sup> W. Evans-Wentz, *The Fairy Faith in Celtic Countries*, op. cit., p.320

<sup>101</sup> C. Houlbrook and S. Young (eds.) *Magical Folk* op. cit., p.32

<sup>102</sup> S. Young, *The Fairy Census*, vols. I and II, op. cit.

<sup>103</sup> The Findhorn Community, *The Findhorn Garden*, 1975, p.viii-x

<sup>104</sup> The Hermetic and Alchemical Writings of Paracelsus, Two Volumes, translated by Arthur Edward Waite, London, 1894.

<sup>105</sup> The Findhorn Garden, The Nature Spirits, pp. 102 - 125

Greek mythology, that also occurs in the work of C. S. Lewis, questions Crombie on the nature of human beings, and calls us, humans, ‘stupid’. Crombie has quite a long dialogue with the entity, representing it as a back and forth conversation, though he does wonder later if the experience had been external to him. He says, ‘I realise that I was not seeing him with my physical sight, though when I closed my eyes he was not there. And the communication between us was, no doubt, taking place on a mental or telepathic level by means of thought transference probably in the form of images and symbols projected into my unconscious mind and translated into words by my consciousness.’<sup>106</sup> He also ponders ‘why a faun?’<sup>107</sup> The ease with which Crombie seems to be able to experience Kurmos, and later Pan, is noteworthy, particularly when he later recounts that ‘it took sixty-three years for my wish [of seeing the fairies] to be granted.’<sup>108</sup> While Crombie asserts that he never set out to learn how to see and speak to nature spirits, when he looks back, he can see that many episodes in his life, from the age of three when he threw coins into a wishing well, various other experiences of the natural world, and a desire to get to know it better were preparing him in body, mind and spirit to be able to reach out to the esoteric realm.<sup>109</sup> In conversation with him, Pan specifically references the time when Crombie spent ten years living in rural isolation to aid his recovery from a ‘chronic heart ailment’, which Pan sees as part of Crombie’s training to be able to have contact with both Himself and the other nature spirits.<sup>110</sup> Crombie explains the physiological nature of the spirits that he encounters, ‘their primary state is what may be termed as a “light body”. It is a whirl or vortex of energy in constant motion. Nebulous like a fine mist, it glows with coloured light, sometimes one single colour, sometimes two or more which do not mix but remain separate like the colours of a rainbow.’<sup>111</sup> Furthermore, he goes on to say, ‘They may be regarded as whirls of

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<sup>106</sup> Ibid., p.105

<sup>107</sup> Ibid., p.107

<sup>108</sup> Ibid., p.125

<sup>109</sup> Ibid., p.124

<sup>110</sup> Ibid., p.122

<sup>111</sup> Ibid., p.114

energy, but energy with intelligence. It is possible to see and to communicate with these light bodies.’<sup>112</sup> He then explains, very much in keeping with the documented beliefs of Theosophy, that in order to work with plants and trees, the spirits must, ‘use the energies channelled to them by the Devas to build up an “etheric body” ... for each plant according to its archetypal pattern. The plant grows and develops within that counterpart. In order to fulfil their task, the nature spirits too must take on an etheric body.’<sup>113</sup> ‘Each material form has an etheric counterpart ... according to esoterica, we have an etheric body, as well as other higher bodies. We are incarnate spirit.’<sup>114</sup> Crombie is writing in the mid-1970s about experiences he has had in the mid-1960s, and yet even here, while the human world is fighting wars but also exploring space, there is concern for the environment. Via Kurmos and Pan, Crombie has confirmed what he had known, that humans in general were destroying the ecological balance of the planet. ‘It would be much better,’ he says, ‘if man would ask the nature spirits [before forcing changes] to bring them about by modifying the etheric counterpart.’<sup>115</sup> Crombie’s ideas sound very much in keeping with counter-cultural movements of the 1960s, but certainly, in the twenty-first century, even mainstream governments are now calling for more sustainable ways of living, working and producing, if we are to stand even a slight chance of slowing down the amount of damage being inflicted upon the environment, and it is the climate deniers who are becoming the marginalised and ignored voices. It can only be hoped that since Crombie’s conversations with Pan in the 1970s, there has been more effective contact and diplomacy with the esoteric world, in a bid to turn back the damage we humans are causing, before it is too late. As Pan says, ‘With such people [who believe in nature spirits] they will always co-operate when invoked, which simply means asking for help. This simple awareness is open to anyone who seeks it.’<sup>116</sup> Paracelsus writes about Elementals, or Dwarves, Sylphs, Salamanders and Undines, in the sixteenth

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<sup>112</sup> Ibid., p.114

<sup>113</sup> Ibid., p.114

<sup>114</sup> Ibid., p.116

<sup>115</sup> Ibid., p.116

<sup>116</sup> Ibid., p.118



century. They are spirits which govern the ‘Empedoclean elements of antiquity: Earth, Air, Fire and Water.’<sup>117</sup> In later mythology, Undines become mermaids, dwarves remain or become synonymous with gnomes, and sylphs become fairies. The salamanders seem to be the only entity which most closely resembles its real and biological animal counterpart, with most classical scholars describing it as a lizard, but with the ability to create, live in and extinguish fire, which is mythological.<sup>118</sup> The closest we get to a fairy or fairy like being equivalent to a salamander, is Paracelsus’ assertion that the ‘will o the wisp’ is ‘the misbegotten of the salamander spirit.’<sup>119</sup>

### Fairies and Fungi

Mushrooms and fungi crop up most popularly in fairy tale illustrations, usually the red spotted kind, or *fly agaric* (*amanita muscaria*), which has very potent hallucinogenic properties and is highly poisonous. These fungi are often shown as fairy houses.<sup>120</sup> Most of these depictions occur in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, in illustrations for fairy tales and children’s stories and have become a staple symbol of fairies, when anyone is trying to create a fairy scene.<sup>121</sup> The hallucinogenic effect of mushrooms was documented in the eighteenth century, and written about famously in Lewis Carroll’s 1862 novel, *Alice’s Adventures Underground*, which eventually became *Alice in Wonderland*.<sup>122</sup> But the associations of fungi and folklore occur further back in cultural history, with mushrooms being depicted in a pre-historic cave in Spain,<sup>123</sup> appearing on Medieval manuscripts,<sup>124</sup> and cropping up in the Early Modern period

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<sup>117</sup> Paracelsus, *Four Treatises of Theophrastus Von Hohenheim Called Paracelsus*. JHU Press, 1996

<sup>118</sup> Ragan, Mark A. (2023). *Kingdoms, Empires, and Domains: The History of High-Level Biological Classification*. Oxford University Press. p. 57.

<sup>119</sup> Paracelsus, *op. cit.*

<sup>120</sup> M. Jay, *Fungi, Fairies and Folklore*, Public Domain Review 2020, [www.publicdomainreview.org/essay/fungi-folklore-and-fairyland](http://www.publicdomainreview.org/essay/fungi-folklore-and-fairyland) accessed July 2025

<sup>121</sup> Artists such as Arthur Rackham and Margaret Tarrant depicted fungi in the backgrounds of their fairy pictures.

<sup>122</sup> L. Carroll, *Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland*, 1865

<sup>123</sup> B. Akers, *A Cave In Spain Contains the Earliest Known Depictions of Mushrooms*, *Mushroom: The Journal of Wild Mushrooming*, [www.mushroomthejournal.com/a-cave-in-spain-contains-the-earliest-known-depictions-of-mushrooms/](http://www.mushroomthejournal.com/a-cave-in-spain-contains-the-earliest-known-depictions-of-mushrooms/) accessed July 2025

<sup>124</sup> A. Diablacova, *Medieval Mushrooms*, *Leiden Medievalists Blog*, University of Leiden, 2021

with fairy rings associated with dancing demons, witches and fairies.<sup>125</sup> Fairy rings in folklore, the natural phenomenon of finding mushrooms arranged in a circle, commonly under trees or on damp lawns or in fields, are often described as entry portals to Fairyland.<sup>126</sup> The passage is obtained from stepping inside the ring, though, not by consuming the mushrooms themselves. So, the association with the fairies in this instance, will have more to do with the appearance of the ring, a quite magical occurrence in itself, as they do tend to appear overnight, than a psychedelic one. However, later experimentation with psilocybin in the twentieth century has recorded some experiences with fairy like beings encountered by people while under the influence of psychedelic mushrooms.<sup>127</sup> Indeed, fairy rings of this type may have given rise to accounts of the fairies themselves dancing in a round, though traditional dances in England were largely circles until late in the eighteenth century. Circle dancing is also a popular witchcraft trope too, probably from the same provenance.<sup>128</sup>

### **Fairy Glamour**

Fairy encounters from the past recount the beguiling of the human senses in order to fool humans into doing something for the fairies. In the Medieval period, as we have seen, visions of fairyland could easily be done away with by holding up the Host or speaking the name of Jesus.<sup>129</sup> Other accounts speak of a midwife, kidnapped to give help to a fairy birth, who is given ointment to put on the baby's eyes. The midwife accidentally gets some ointment in her own eye and is able to see the truth about the place she has been brought to, a homely cottage is transformed into a sumptuous castle. A few days later, the midwife sees the fairy man again, robbing market stalls of produce unseen by anyone. She challenges him and when the fairy

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<sup>125</sup> O. Campbell, How Fungi form fairy rings and inspire superstitions, National Geographic, 2024, [www.nationalgeographic.com/environment/article/mushroom-fungi-mycelium-fairy-rings-myth](https://www.nationalgeographic.com/environment/article/mushroom-fungi-mycelium-fairy-rings-myth) accessed July 2025

<sup>126</sup> R. Sugg, Fairies, A Dangerous History, 2018, p.46-7

<sup>127</sup> A.K. Davis, et al, *Survey of Entity encounter Experiences occasioned by inhaled N, N-dimethyltryptamine: Phenomenology, interpretation, and enduring effects*, Journal of Psychopharmacology, 2020; 34(9): 1008 – 1020.

<sup>128</sup> J. Kruse, Dances with Elves, British Fairies, 2019, [www.britishfairies.wordpress.com/2019/01/13/dances-with-elves/](https://www.britishfairies.wordpress.com/2019/01/13/dances-with-elves/) accessed July 2025

<sup>129</sup> R.F. Green, op. cit., p.7

finds out that she has seen him, he blinds her so she cannot see anything ever again. Most fairy glammers are reported to work the other way around. In her short story collection, *Ladies of Grace Adieu*, Susanna Clarke reveals how fairies make squalid and slovenly surroundings, and their own clothing, seem luxurious.<sup>130</sup> Once the spell is broken, the real world breaks through. This is also the case for fairy money, which will disappear by morning.

## **Fairy Bells**

Perhaps nowadays, the most famous fairy bells are those of Disney's Tinkerbell. When Tinkerbell was originally portrayed on stage in the Edwardian theatre, it was by spotlight and a bicycle bell. The jingle of a typical bicycle bell is very reminiscent of the kind of bells we now associate with fairies, and also with Father Christmas; a sweet, high pitched, melodious sound of a group of small coin-sized bells. So, it certainly is no surprise to find that some of the people who have had encounters with fairies tell of hearing fairy bells either before, during or after their experience.<sup>131</sup> Fairy bells would seem to be a significant accoutrement to fairy encounters and the fact that bells crop up generally within our religious and social culture (they crop up in more mundane events too, being useful as sirens, alarms and musical instruments), being associated with ritual, supernatural events and have been associated with religion almost since their invention, makes them an important item to explore within discussions about the fairy experience. The first record of church bells being hung in England was in the late 10<sup>th</sup> century at Crowland Abbey in Lincolnshire. Bells are used in exorcism and excommunication, for weddings and funerals. Church bells are often used in literature and folktales to forewarn and foreshadow negative events, usually an impending death or disaster. Bells are associated with Irish and Scottish fairies and church bells are said to ward off the fairies. There are stories of fairies stealing church bells or causing a church to be built elsewhere because the noise of

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<sup>130</sup> S. Clarke, *Ladies of Grace Adieu*, 2010

<sup>131</sup> S. R. Young, *The Fairy Census*, vols. I and II, (2017, 2023)

bells would upset them.<sup>132</sup> Santa Claus, who is often called an elf is supposed to be accompanied by jingly bells on his sleigh. This may be a common occurrence in Scandinavian countries, with bells being worn on sleighs to warn passers-by of the arrival of the sleigh, which would have been quieted by the snow. The white Queen in Narnia has bells on her sleigh, part of her subterfuge to capture Edmund and Lucy, giving her a false aura of goodness when she wants to be seen as non-threatening.<sup>133</sup> Fairy bells are vastly different from church bells. They are softer, and much smaller emitting a sweeter, high-pitched sound as though being shaken. Jacob Marley announces his coming by ringing all the disused servants' bells in Scrooge's house. There are also many floral species with bell shaped flowers that have a folkloric association with the fairies. The bluebell is said to chime when fairies are summoned to a gathering, but if a human hears it, it will signal their death.<sup>134</sup> One of Cicely Mary Barker's flower fairies is the Canterbury Bell Fairy, a plant with bell shaped purple flowers. What is interesting about this fairy is her accompanying poem which also mentions that when they ring, they 'call the fairy folk to sing.' In the story of the Green Children of Woolpit, it is the sound of bells that drives them into the human world.

Folklore associated with fairies can be compelling, complex, contradictory and even comical. In testament to their longevity through the *long durée* there is folklore from every epoch of history, and surprisingly much that has survived to the present day. Why has fairy folklore proven so durable? If one were to time travel to any point in history, there would be plenty of things that would make no sense to us, nor to the people of the past. Except fairies. From Anglo-Saxon to the twenty-first century, we would have common ground, and plenty to discuss about our attitudes to fairies and fairy-like beings.

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<sup>132</sup> M. Warren, The Folklore of Bells, 2017, [www.folklorethursday.com/folklife/the-folklore-of-bells/](http://www.folklorethursday.com/folklife/the-folklore-of-bells/) accessed July 2025

<sup>133</sup> J. Poklad, Sleigh Bells and Factory Elves: The Spectacular Economy of Santa Claus, Victorians Institute Journal (2016) 44 (1): 157–183.

<sup>134</sup> Jo Woolf, Britain's Landmarks and Legends: The Fascinating Stories Embedded in our Landscapes, National Trust, 2023

In these first two chapters, I have mapped out the bedrock of fairy belief in England. I've tried to document how fairy belief has evolved, how, while quite linear and definitive in some eras of history, there are still surprises. There are environmentalist fairies at a time when fairies were more considered to be threatening and hostile, there are fairy lights before the invention of electricity, there are strange voices, laughter, music, when fairies were expected to be cartoon like and feminine. It is quite easy to represent the history of fairies as an evolution, but fairies do not always stick to the brief. What is perhaps the most surprising about modern fairy belief is its durability in the light of technology and advances in visual media. With AI and VR, hyperreality can create fairy worlds and beings, but even more surprising is people finding a fairy in their back garden or on the morning dog walk. In the next two chapters, the people who see fairies and the fairies that they see will be at the centre of examination. What is remarkable, not only that people are seeing fairies at all, even though that is, but that people continue to do so. And that many different kinds of people are seeing many different kinds of fairies. I hope to examine where the observers are coming from culturally, and also where the fairies are coming from and what effect the encounters are having on both the observers and the fairies. But above all, I hope they represent the incredible relationship between people and this amazing cultural phenomenon, what it shows us about how folklore and mythology is created, perpetuated and appreciated by many different groups of people and fairy beings.

## Part Two

## Chapter Three

### Who sees Fairies?

*If rationality cannot see things like the Secret Commonwealth, it is because rationality's vision is limited. The secret commonwealth is there. We cannot see it with rationality any more than we can weigh something with a microscope – it is the wrong sort of instrument.*

*Phillip Pullman<sup>1</sup>*

*Mr. Kirk of Aberfoyle, living among Celtic people, treats the land of faery as a mere fact in nature, a world with its own laws, which he investigates without fear of the Accuser of the Brethren... Firm in his belief, he treats his matter in a scientific spirit, as if he were dealing with generally recognised physical phenomena.*

*Andrew Lang<sup>2</sup>*

What fairies are, is the first question asked by this thesis and one of the main threads which runs through each chapter. Most people have an idea of what a fairy might look like and some basic folklore awareness about them, garnered from history, folklore and folk or fairy tales. But this chapter looks at what kind of people see or otherwise experience fairies. It is their descriptions and observations tell us what fairies are.

Who can see fairies? The simple answer is 'anybody.' All sorts of people have seen fairies or had a fairy encounter, from all levels of society, backgrounds, ages, genders, and beliefs, some going as far back as the sixth century.<sup>3</sup> And thanks to the hardworking folklorists of the last three centuries and more, many of these accounts have been recorded and collected. Some of these accounts have become myth, legend, fairy tale and folklore, but they keep on coming, with accounts of fairy encounters being posted on social media, recorded in podcasts or even reported in the newspapers, every day. One of the earliest recorded encounters comes from Walter Map, writing in the twelfth century, and speaks of a Shropshire Lord 'who encountered a set of ladies, taller and nobler than humans, dancing in linen shifts in a house beside a forest at night. He seized one and married her, and she gave him a son before he broke the condition she had laid upon him for remaining—that he would not speak of her sisters, with whom he had

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<sup>1</sup> P. Pullman, *The Secret Commonwealth*, The Book of Dust Trilogy (London: Penguin Random House UK, 2019), p.482

<sup>2</sup> R. Kirk and A. Lang, *The Secret Commonwealth of Elves, Fauns and Fairies* (London: David Nutt, 1893), Introduction

<sup>3</sup> S. Young, *We need to talk about Fairies*, in C. Houlbrook and S. Young eds., *Magical Folk: British and Irish Fairies 500 AD to the Present*, Gibson Square, 2020, p.11

found her – and she too vanished.<sup>4</sup> It is to be hoped that this method of getting a wife is not a common reflection of the times, though it does reflect a more common aspect of fairy lore, the exchange of a bargain between the human and the fairy. Inevitably, the human mostly manages to break the vow they have made. Then there is the 1607 account, of fairies in Sussex, given in trial notes of two women indicted for witchcraft. One of the two, Susan Swapper, who was sentenced to hang, but had her sentence commuted to imprisonment, told of encounters with the ‘Queen of the Fairies’ who promised her treasures, prosperity and even cured her from a sickness. It is then recorded that the price for such help was nosegays, fruit and ‘a piece of sugar.’<sup>5</sup> And a later account, collected by William Crossing in the 1890s, reflects a positive encounter, of pixies baking a cake for a hungry farm labourer who had gone without breakfast having been ploughing since dawn.<sup>6</sup> Some of these encounters do sound more like fairy tales, and that may be the way that the recorder of the encounter has relayed them. Most of the modern encounters have no transactions conducted between fairies and humans, and only rarely is there any kind of direct interaction. The modern encounters are largely visual, occasionally auditory, and last less than a minute.<sup>7</sup> And the vast majority of the accounts are accidental encounters that the participant did not expect to happen. While some people may have had endogenous encounters through meditation, mediumship and trance, for example, those kinds of encounters have a different quality to them, having been at least partially shaped by the mind or the imagination, either of the participant or medium, or both, as part of the connection to an immaterial realm. And even in accidental encounters it could be argued that the human participant has managed to tune into the ethereal plane, into the separate fairy realm, which the fairies have not left. It is certainly possible that a human may possess the clairvoyance to tune into the ethereal plane without knowing it while on a walk in nature. I will

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<sup>4</sup> R. Hutton, *Queens of the Wild* extract in Lapham’s Quarterly, 2022

<sup>5</sup> Houlbrook and Young, op. cit., p.23

<sup>6</sup> *ibid*, p.46

<sup>7</sup> S. Young, *Fairy Census*, vol. i and ii, op. cit.



deal with these types of encounter in more detail in a later chapter. But the accidental encounters do not go much beyond appearance in their similarity to folklore. There are no accounts of abductions, deals being struck, offers of fairy food and drink, transformations, wish grantings or beguilements. The fairies are there, and then they are not. What are the implications then of these kinds of modern fairy encounter? Perhaps the answer lies in the kind of participant, the twenty-first century human who may be quite different from their counterparts from history. The issues that perhaps drove people to look for supernatural answers to their problems are very different nowadays. Levels of poverty are nothing in comparison to those of the Medieval and the Early Modern periods, even the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, and while not wishing to undermine contemporary poverty, which is still a hardship relatively speaking, most people nowadays are unlikely to starve to death while the country looks on, or indeed together with the rest of their neighbours. Disease is likewise much less threatening; childbirth and infant mortality is vastly improved from even a hundred years ago, and average life expectancy is seventy to eighty years for most people, and rising.<sup>8</sup> Poverty, disease, death are the things that throughout history have caused people to reach out to the supernatural world, which have been governed by supernatural creatures, especially fairies. Poverty, disease, death and childbirth were the meat and drink of fairy encounters in the past. Yet, modern encounters persist. A widespread scepticism towards the spiritual and religious, the rise of science and our reliance on it, our continued belief in the materiality of the world have all dampened our belief in superstition, but these have not eradicated it, and while there is a resurgence and an avid desire for new forms of spirituality, that spirituality has been and is being (re) constructed. There is also a confidence in the safety and security of most quiet places, and a reliance on the rule of law. Most people encounter absolutely nothing untoward at all on their daily dog walk, jog, hike, etc., most people are unafraid to walk along a country

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<sup>8</sup>[www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/birthsdeathsandmarriages/lifeexpectancies/bulletins/nationallifeexpectancies/unitedkingdom/2020to2022](https://www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/birthsdeathsandmarriages/lifeexpectancies/bulletins/nationallifeexpectancies/unitedkingdom/2020to2022)

lane, across a field, through a park. Attacks from fellow humans in lonely places, notwithstanding dramatic news bulletins and TV series, are rare. Most lonely places are also quite close to populated places, so it is rather amazing that these encounters happen at all, given the traditional shyness and elusiveness of fairies. However, while many of the social problems of the past that fairies would be appealed to for help have largely disappeared, there are still problems that humans have to face, that seem just as insurmountable: debt, unemployment, loss, breakdown in relationships, cancer, allergies, natural and human-caused disasters, still manage to cause serious problems for people. And some people, driven to hopelessness and desperation, amongst other things, still turn to supernaturally for comfort and help.

For all the intents and purposes of this chapter, I will examine the exogenous type of fairy encounter, as shared in the datasets I have researched. The fairies that are seen ‘out there’ appear to have the similar quality of seeing a rare type of wildlife. And, as with rare wildlife, we might assume that they are out in the open by mistake, by necessity, or just bad luck, and that somewhere in the undergrowth, they have a well-hidden, safe place to which they are trying to return. There are many examples of this type of fairy-like being in the collected data. Fairies, however, have the added skill of being able to shapeshift or disappear.<sup>9</sup> For example the fairy-like being encountered by this male participant in his forties, who saw, ‘what looked like a mix of a frog and a sparrow. When I got closer the little thing gave me a look of malice. I felt it was male. When he noticed I could see him he [went] invisible. Second time, a stick lying by a road start[ed] to float and melt and took a shape of some winged creature.’<sup>10</sup> Historically, fairies are believed to come from a fairy land, which can be accessed via caves, barrows, tumuli, and fairy

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<sup>9</sup> Kruse, John (2022), ‘Shapeshifting faeries’, British Fairies, [www.britishfairies.wordpress.com/2022/05/29/shapeshifting-faeries/](http://www.britishfairies.wordpress.com/2022/05/29/shapeshifting-faeries/)

<sup>10</sup> S. Young, *Fairy Census Vol i*, op. cit., 2017, Ss74, p.89-90

rings, all physical aspects of the human landscape.<sup>11</sup> The implication then, is that fairies have access to a separate space within the human world, or parallel to it to which these physical features are portals. The fairies seem to be able to come and go between their home and the human world and are often depicted as being as unaware of us as we are of them. For humans, access to fairyland, or to seeing fairies at all, is more difficult. There are rules, such as special times and places. The abovementioned places, but also times of day, the so-called 'liminal' times, dawn and twilight, midnight, or the astronomical, the phases of the moon, often seen as the trigger for supernatural encounters, the equinoxes and solstices, the so-called Celtic wheel of the year festivals, like Imbolc, Beltane, Lammastide and Samhain.<sup>12</sup> Robert Kirk has fairies very firmly in the human world, no doubt because he also agrees with the theory, popular in Medieval and Early Modern times, that fairies were fallen angels who have been trapped on Earth. Kirk has them living close by human habitations, taking over abandoned places, often on the move across the landscape.<sup>13</sup>

I will be referring to data from a variety of sources, over three hundred encounters that have taken place in England in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. I have also included some examples of encounters from earlier centuries which I will introduce as case studies or comparative examples. The quantitative data are not definitive nor exhaustive, but from a qualitative perspective, both singularly and collectively, the data give some detailed illustrations of the kinds of people who have encountered fairies. I also have some anecdotal evidence from surveys I have posted on social media among those who expressed an interest in fairy encounters. I have also included the English entries from books by Janet Bord, *Fairies: Encounters with Little People*, Marjorie Johnson, *Seeing Fairies*, David Tame, *Real Fairies*, and Ceri Houlbrook and Simon Young, *Magical Folk*. But the majority of the data come from Simon

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<sup>11</sup> K. Briggs, *The Fairies in Tradition and Literature*, op. cit., p. 4-5

<sup>12</sup> R. Graves, *The White Goddess*, Faber, 1948

<sup>13</sup> B. Walsh, *The Secret Commonwealth and the Fairy Belief Complex*, op. cit., 2002, p.35

Young's Fairy Census Part I (2017) and Part II (2024). These accounts were collected in this century but go back as far as the 1920s.<sup>14</sup>

So, who sees fairies, where, when and how, under what conditions? Here is an exploration of some of the kinds of people who have had fairy encounters.

## **Gender**

I am conscious of using the terms, 'male and female' as opposed to 'men and women'; the former being sex based while the latter gender based, though even this distinction is problematic.<sup>15</sup> Gender has recently proved both controversial and complex, while most of the data collected and investigated in this thesis shows the more traditional binary biological descriptions, so it is difficult to comment on the range of diversities of gender that see or otherwise experience fairies, and whether or not it makes a difference to people based on their gender identity. As in many studies of alternative spiritual practice, females dominate the spaces, except where there are specific prohibitions, like female only covens or men only groups. But even where participation is not proscribed, females still make up the majority.<sup>16</sup> This raises some issues, though whether it is the latest information is doubtful. Religious participation and worship tend to be female dominated in general, even though religious leaders are still male in the majority.<sup>17</sup> Alternative spiritual practice does have more females in leadership roles but still with participants largely female.<sup>18</sup> The data from the Fairy Investigation Society census shows a ratio of 2:1, more or less, in favour of females having fairy encounters.<sup>19</sup> Is this because, as is commonly believed, women are more sensitive than men to supernatural

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<sup>14</sup> S. Young, *The Fairy Census*, vol. i, 2017, vol. ii 2024.

<sup>15</sup> B. M. Woodhill and C. A. Samuels, *Sex vs Gender: A Biological Basis for gender, not sex*, 2021

<sup>16</sup> P. Heelas and L. Woodhead, *The Spiritual Revolution*, 2008, pp 102 - 107

<sup>17</sup> Church of England, 2019

<sup>18</sup> M. Trzebiatowska, *'It's all for girls': revisiting the gender gap in New Age spiritualities*, 2013.

<sup>19</sup> S. Young, *Fairy Census Vol I and II*, op. cit.

forces? This is doubtful and perhaps a hangover from the past where consorting with supernatural forces other than Christian ones (which are limited), was more likely to be a female experience than male, given that females were seen as easily tempted by demonic forces.<sup>20</sup> Perhaps it is still more likely that females are more willing to talk about their encounters than men, though this may be changing. Would males want to admit to seeing a fairy, with its overt feminine qualities? Would a fairy be unmasculine? Does the evidence show that males as much as females have an interest in and a sensitivity to supernatural encounters? Males, more than females, are more likely to be into fantasy RPG games, historical re-enactments, cosplay, for example, where fairies and fairy-like beings reside in many iterations, but that may have more to do with the dressing up aspect than the fairy aspect. Fairy researchers seem to be quite evenly divided between male and female, though the academic/research aspect may not be the same as the practice of fairy magic or fairy mediumship. Academic research historically like so many other fields was restricted and open almost exclusively to males in the past, but that is most likely because practically all fields of research were closed to females. But there does not seem to be a unmasculine stigma attached to the collection of folklore if glancing down a shelf of the folklore section of a library is anything to go by. What is becoming increasingly clear is not the importance of 'male,' 'female,' 'cis,' 'trans' definitions of sex and gender, not identity, but what is 'masculine' and 'feminine,' our cultural designations. Our society in the West is moving albeit very slowly away from the strict gender stereotypes that have dominated the way we identify ourselves and each other, to a less rigid approach. In the past fifty years, every aspect of our culture has been categorised into what is masculine and feminine, and given birth to the inevitable misogyny and homophobia that these categorisations foster. The delineations between these two are fine but absolute, and any drifting or merging, particularly from masculine to feminine (though feminine

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<sup>20</sup> Anderson, A., & Gordon, R. (1978). *Witchcraft and the Status of Women - The Case of England*. *The British Journal of Sociology*, 29(2), 171–184.

to masculine is also, but perhaps less violently, frowned upon) violently decried.<sup>21</sup> In the pagan community, even there, spiritual pathways are still split into masculine and feminine, largely because of Wicca and other paths using this duality as part of their worship, though again, especially with the Goddess Movement in Glastonbury gaining traction, the traditional balance between god and goddess might be losing its appeal.<sup>22</sup> Fairy belief and participation still seems to be largely female dominated. At a recent fairy fayre, organised by Karen Kay, one of the foremost organisers and practitioners in fairy spirituality, all four of the seminar speakers were female, with the exception of one speaker who brought a male partner with her, who did not speak as long as she did. The audience of about sixty people were also mostly female. The participants and stall holders at the fairy market were also mostly female, many of whom were cosplaying fairies in colourful costumes, some with wings, and with ornate floral or bejewelled headdresses. Kay also employs several professional female/feminine models who dress up as fairies in very high end costumes and fresh flowers. Of the two males I interviewed, who had stalls at the fayre, one was a carpenter and sculptor who had designed and built very beautiful wooden fairy houses (not a shade of pink in sight, but red roofs and white walls, oaken style doors), and the other had created a fairyland version of World of Warcraft.<sup>23</sup> But especially in modern mainstream culture, fairies are still either childish or feminine or both. Little girls dress up as fairies, in the tradition begun in the mid-Victorian period, in a tutu with a wand and tiara and ballet type shoes.<sup>24</sup> The term 'fairies' from the nineteenth century onwards, became much more closely related to the female be-winged varieties, whereas prior to that time, fairy meant any little supernatural creature. Moreover, around the 1870s, the term 'fairy' became a slur used to describe male homosexuals combining both homophobia and misogyny.<sup>25</sup> This term

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<sup>21</sup> Milne, B., Cambazoglu, I., Haslop, C., & Ringrose, J. (2024). *Researching Young Masculinities During the Rise of 'Misogyny Influencers': Exploring Affective and Embodied Discomfort and Dilemmas of Feminist and Queer Researchers*.

<sup>22</sup> Kraemer, C.H. (2012), *Gender and Sexuality in Contemporary Paganism*. Religion Compass, 6: 390-401.

<sup>23</sup> Glastonbury Fairy Fayre and Ball, March 2023

<sup>24</sup> D. Purkiss, *Troublesome Things*, op. cit., p.225-227

<sup>25</sup> R. Norton, *The History of the Word 'Gay' and other Queer words*, Gay Times, 2015

has not gone away, and reflects the continued prejudice expressed towards a male in particular, who 'behaves' like a female, in that any male, regardless of sexual orientation, will be slurred in this and worse fashion if they are perceived to have strayed into popular culture's strict idea of what cultural furniture has been feminine designated. However, it is interesting to note the use of mermaids and unicorns as a metaphor for the trans experience, with the major charity representing trans children and young people called *Mermaids.org*. The gender unicorn is also being used as an age-appropriate mascot for young children to try to teach about the difference between sex and gender.<sup>26</sup> There are two takeaways from exploring gender and fairy encounters. One is this idea of fairies equating to femininity or pejoratively as effeminate. Even the use of the term 'fey' can be seen as othering those people who come across as strange, obscure, otherworldly and effeminate. The idea of a fairy as humanlike but not human, may resonate with people who feel ostracised because of their sexuality or gender, or because they are nerdy or geeky. There is also an implied sexualisation of the female fairy type, and perhaps more worrying, the sexualisation of the childlike aspects of the effeminate/feminine fairy, certainly the Victorian idolisation of the child, which may not have intended to but certainly sustains the more insalubrious aspects of this cult.<sup>27</sup> This then extends to Cottingley in the early 20<sup>th</sup> Century, with the beguiling of middle-aged men by two pretty young girls and their fake fairy photographs.

I have used the one hundred and forty respondents from Fairy Census Volume I and the one hundred and twenty-two accounts from the Fairy Census Volume II, which is total of the English region data published in the census. 68% of the data comes from female participants and 30% from male, with 2% not disclosing their gender. There was no possibility to indicate non-binary or trans gender identity. In all genders, only just over half of the respondents give their

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<sup>26</sup> <https://transstudent.org>

<sup>27</sup> Estevez, *Victorian Cult of the child: Innocence and Experience, Ignorance and Knowledge*, in English 271: Psychoanalysis and Literature, 2014

preferences to the data requested: the gender of the entity, whether the entity was dressed in or gave the impression of dark colours, darkness, or light colours, luminosity, whether the encounter was positive, neutral or negative, and whether the encounter had an emotional effect on them. For this last category, I had to interpret what they said in their accounts, so I looked for feelings: happy, sad, fearful, and also if they stated that the experience stayed with them or influenced their lives, or that they connected with the entities beyond merely seeing or hearing them. The responses from either gender to this final category are balanced, 43% of males and 46% of females had an emotive response, for example, the middle-aged woman from Yorkshire, who indicated that the encounter had made her 'extremely happy'. She witnessed what she thought were 'daddy-long legged type creatures, while having a picnic beside a river with her family. On closer inspection, she noted that they were 'a sylph or a tree fairy.'<sup>28</sup> Or the man in his seventies from Wiltshire when he was feeling 'sad and wistful' who believed that fairies were shaking the leaves of a bush next to him, even though there was no wind or any other external stimuli.<sup>29</sup> But it should be noted that out of the whole sample, over half of the respondents did not record an emotional connection. My expectations are largely met with this sample: of course, there are more female than male respondents, as discussed earlier, and 33% of males compared to 23% of females determined their entity to be of the same gender, with only 17% of males and 20% of females seeing the opposite gender. "Like a Sindy doll with clothes that looked to be made from natural things like leaves. It was the same size as the doll but thinner, more ethereal."<sup>30</sup> This is the description from a woman in her fifties recounting her experience when she was five years old in the 1970s. It is interesting because it feels like a typically female response; it references a popular doll, a British version of Barbie, and a mostly female oriented toy, with interchangeable outfits, and accessories, even a

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<sup>28</sup> S. Young, *Fairy Census*, vol. ii Ss612, p.166

<sup>29</sup> *ibid.* Ss607 p.162

<sup>30</sup> S. Young, *Fairy Census*, vol. i Ss33, p.57



house.<sup>31</sup> Then we have the account from a teenage boy writing about the 2010s, who saw a “tall, dark, thin, featureless” figure while out for a twilight walk in the woods with his father. The sighting was even accompanied by the sound of “aggressive, corrupted form of the fairy bells of old.”<sup>32</sup> I cite these two examples as perhaps being typical of the differences between what female and male viewers might have seen. And there are many accounts like these, in fact the majority of the accounts I use in this thesis describe either tiny, mostly female with wings, or little, mostly male and ugly. The boy’s description of his entity is a very masculine (and scary) figure, barely a fairy at all, except that the participant also heard fairy bells, which for him is the defining feature of the encounter, as on its own, the description sounds more ghostly. But perhaps the most interesting take away about gender, in these data at least, is the fact that 52% of the male respondents and 57% of the female respondents either did not state the gender, saw mixed gender groups of entities, or avoided using gendered pronouns altogether, commonly using ‘it’. More male respondents saw dark colours, silhouettes or dark skin, or all three, compared to only 27% of the female respondents. But when it comes to the light colours and luminosity, the numbers are closer, more females than males, but only just: 52% to 40%. When it comes to the positive, neutral or negative categories of the experience, the males are quite evenly spaced, just under or over a third for each category, with neutral 2% more than positive. For the females, as expected, a low number felt the experience was negative, just 14%, compared to the males at 24%, but more females had a neutral experience, almost half of the sample, and half of the female responses, and in both genders, a third of respondents had positive encounters. The biggest and most predictable outcome, from this sample of respondents, is the ratio of males to females, but beyond that, the responses are fairly evenly matched, with only more males than females seeing dark colours, darkness in general, silhouettes or dark skin. Almost everyone, male or female, used the generic word ‘fairy,’ with

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<sup>31</sup> [www.sindy.co.uk](http://www.sindy.co.uk)

<sup>32</sup> S. Young, *Fairy Census*, vol. ii Ss 501, p.23

some specifying some other genres of fairy like being: gnome, pixie, sprite. Some talked of ‘little men’ some used the more general term, ‘creature.’ Where this was done, it was clear then, what is the prevailing view, that ‘fairy’ refers to what Simon Young calls SWFs (small, winged fairies), and if you mean anything else you must specify the appropriate term. But the biggest surprise perhaps, is the fact that seventy-eight accounts, twenty-two male and fifty-four female opt for neutrality in the identification of the beings they experienced. Neutral seems to be the watch word, not only considering gender differences. Is this easily explained because of the shock and surprise at seeing something otherworldly in the first place? Or the inability to identify the gender of the entity? Or even, that the genders do not matter, that some saw multiple fairy-like beings and assumed or identified them to be a mixture of genders, or even that gender in the case of fairy like beings is perhaps not applicable? They are not human after all. Whatever it means that more females than males have recorded their experiences, the upshot seems to be that once split up into the relevant gender (and in the case of most of the data, the respondents were not asked their cis or trans status at all, nor their sexuality) the general experience is similar. Males and females experience fairy encounters largely in a similar way. With only colour the prevailing difference. And in that respect, taking the categories of ‘little, male and ugly’ and ‘little, female, pretty with wings’, the assumption that the male entities will be dressed in darker, traditional colours, and the female entities will be dressed in pink, white or generally lighter colours seems to prevail.<sup>33</sup> However, there are some exceptions: Brian Froud recalls his son seeing ‘pink boys under his bed.’<sup>34</sup> Green skin and clothing appear in both sexes of fairies, but for the female beings, this is qualified, ‘emerald green fairies.’<sup>35</sup>

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<sup>33</sup> Fairy Census op. cit. vol. i and vol. ii

<sup>34</sup> D. Tame, Real Fairies, op. cit. p.15

<sup>35</sup> *ibid.*, p.45

## Age

Contrary to expectations, many of the recorded encounters take place in adulthood, though of course there are adult accounts of memories from when the encounters took place as children.<sup>36</sup> About a third of participants were under twenty, with thirty-five of those under the age of ten, so the majority of the encounters took place in adulthood, most happening between the ages of twenty-one and fifty with some going up to the age of ninety.<sup>37</sup> Most of the accounts that took place in childhood happened only once and only then. There was no repetition in adulthood. Some of the teenage and young adult sightings seem to be darker, more negative and even threatening. The common features of some of the childhood fairy encounters found in the Fairy Census show fairies to be active, often flying or dancing, or both. Most of them are seen within a private dwelling, which makes sense as these are the experiences of children, who likely were not allowed to roam far from the house, though some beings were seen in private gardens. One female participant, in the 1990s, in her bedroom, saw 'a little person run the length of the wall, jump up onto the bay windowsill, run halfway along it and then just disappear into thin air. The participant calls it a 'pixie' for the reason that 'it didn't have wings,' because of its size and 'because they wore a pointy hat.'<sup>38</sup> Another, also female, aged five in the 1970s, had a very intense experience, of a light coming in through her bedroom window and as it came closer, it was revealed to be a fairy. The little girl had a conversation with the entity, which 'reassur[ed] me that everything would be ok.'<sup>39</sup> Several of the encounters occurred while the child's parents or carers were present, like the little girl in the 1930s who was in a room with her father and saw a 'pink fairy in the sunshine about ten to twelve centimetres high flying out of the window.' Her father was oblivious to the encounter.<sup>40</sup> One of the spookiest sightings was the little girl out for a walk with her father and little sister, when they encountered some children

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<sup>36</sup> M. Dickson, *Fairy Encounters in 21<sup>st</sup> Century England*, Fairy Investigation Society Newsletter, no. 13, 2021

<sup>37</sup> S. Young, *Fairy Census*, op. cit.,

<sup>38</sup> *Fairy Census*, vol. ii, op. cit., Ss528 p.56

<sup>39</sup> *Fairy Census*, vol. i op. cit, Ss13, p.40

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.* Ss17, p.43

with 'pale greenish skin and pure white hair.' Her father tried to talk to them, but got no reply, then he noticed, 'oh they don't have knees they seem to float in the reeds.' The encounter had a profound effect on both participants, the little girl saw how scared her father was, 'I felt his hand really gripping mine.' In later life, the girl's sister did not remember, and her father never spoke of it.<sup>41</sup> An equal number of the entities of these childhood occurrences, had wings and did not have wings. A few of the encounters also included speech, some also had lights or at least a luminosity, some of the encounters were also repeated. Regular sightings include a green man in the parents' bedroom that the participant felt was guarding her,<sup>42</sup> voices and little men in a laundry basket,<sup>43</sup> and hairy men who looked like 'nasty wolves' coming out of an antique wardrobe.<sup>44</sup>

### **Decade of sighting**

Most of the sightings of the Fairy Census have taken place in the past thirty years, since 1990, with only one recorded in the 1940s (the effect of WW2 perhaps), two in the 1930s, five in the 1950s, and six in the 1960s. From the 1970s onwards, the number of sightings recorded steadily increases, with the highest number being experienced in the 2010s, up until 2023, the cut-off date of the latest of the two censuses. In particular, I would like to show some of the older recollections, which may have also been smoothed and modified by experience and memory. Leaving aside the eighties and nineties, which, at least to me (born in 1966) feel quite modern, after all, car and mobile phones began to appear around that time, closely followed by PCs and Apple Mackintoshes, and of course the internet. It is important to remember that the revived Fairy Investigation Society (FIS) censuses are at the earliest recorded in 2014, leaving a gap of between ninety and forty years between the dates of the older accounts and the recollection of

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<sup>41</sup> Fairy Census vol. i op. cit. Ss68, p.85

<sup>42</sup> *ibid.* Ss66, p.84

<sup>43</sup> *ibid.* Ss94, p.113

<sup>44</sup> *ibid.* Ss37, p.60

them. Some of the accounts recorded elsewhere were taken much closer to the actual time of the encounter. A granddaughter recounts when her grandmother, in her twenties, saw a group of fairies, 'dressed in brown, playing' while the grandmother was doing the washing up, gazing out of the window. She goes on to recall that her grandmother had occasionally experienced 'psychic premonitions' but that seeing the fairies 'felt different, not supernatural.' Around this time, the Cottingley fairy photographs had been published in a magazine and also in a book by Sir Arthur Conan Doyle, the Spiritualist and Theosophy movements were still quite popular, and the population were still coming to terms with the aftermath of the First World War, and the flu pandemic. Supernatural experiences were on the rise, as was the interest in spirituality. The grandmother had not enjoyed her psychic experiences but felt that the fairies were 'tiny people who meant no harm.'<sup>45</sup> Dora Van Gelder was also writing about garden fairies at the time. She was a Theosophist and a clairvoyant and often saw fairies in her own garden with her gift. But she also wrote that, 'fairies in gardens every day are in touch with human beings. Generally, when people come into a garden they know nothing about the fairies there. The fairies know, however, but as there is no human response, they go about their own business.'<sup>46</sup> Van Gelder does not identify fairies dressed in brown in her taxonomy, though she does refer to some who like the colour mauve.<sup>47</sup> Van Gelder's fairies are much more colourful, and because they work in the gardens, they tend to reflect the flowers they are caring for. This is reminiscent of Cicely Mary Barker's flower fairies (1923). The fairies seen in the census are much plainer. Recalling their experiences in the 1930s, there are just four accounts in the Fairy Census, three of which are about childhood experiences that occurred when the participants were under ten years old. One of the accounts tells of two little girls playing with beads and gems, making a meal for the fairies, when one showed up. Both of them saw it: 'the fairy creature was about the size of a grown up's hand. Her wings were a pale lilac and folded across the front of her body which

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<sup>45</sup> Fairy Census, vol. i, op. cit. Ss81A, p.97

<sup>46</sup> D. Tame, Real Fairies, op. cit., p. 47

<sup>47</sup> *ibid.*, p.49

looked like she wore a long dress. We both knew there were fairies and just accepted her being there... I've always felt honoured that I saw what I did.<sup>48</sup> However, there is an account from the same decade, where the participant was in their sixties, who worked in the dairy of the family farm. 'She would sometimes come back into the farmhouse moaning about the butter not churning and that the dairy fairy was up to her usual tricks.' This corresponds nicely with the popular folk song, reputedly from the Early Modern period, sung by dairymaids to expel the bad fairies, who would spoil the butter, and encourage the good fairies to help:

""Come, butter come (x2), Peter stands at the gate, Waiting for a butter cake, Come, butter, come".<sup>49</sup>

## Location

The people who have had accidental fairy encounters were either out in nature or (less common) an urban area, for exercise or travel predominantly, and then came across the fairy creatures by chance. Some have even encountered fairy beings inside their homes, as seen especially with childhood encounters. Though not only. One woman was nursing her baby son in the middle of the night: 'The curtain rail had fallen apart and so there were no curtains, and it was a full moon, there was also a night light on. I noticed something move on the nursing chair in the corner, and saw a little man dressed in red climbing up the side of it. He ran across the chair arm and up onto the back of the chair. There he sat down and looked at me. He looked old in the face but not ancient, and he smoked a pipe but there was no smoke. He looked at me, and I looked at him. I got the feeling I had interrupted him. I asked him if he had lived here since before the houses were built (house is sixty years old) and he nodded very slowly. He then jumped onto the window and vanished.'<sup>50</sup> Another 'It was a very brief encounter late one evening. My partner and I had been watching television and had since switched the TV off and

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<sup>48</sup> Fairy Census, vol. i, op. cit., Ss67, p.84

<sup>49</sup> Percy B. Green called this an "Essex Charm for a Churn, 1650 A.D." in his book "A History of Nursery Rhymes" (published in 1899).

<sup>50</sup> Fairy Census, vol. i, op. cit., Ss77, p.92

[we] were talking for some time. At one point I glanced towards the area where the television is only fleetingly as one would do while not paying any particular attention and caught a glimpse of a small gnome-like man. Immediately I looked again but the entity had gone.<sup>51</sup> One of the most bizarre though tells of an interaction with a video recorder: 'I fell asleep in the chair in the living room and woke at around 3 am. There was a green light coming from the clock on the video recorder (the video was broken – only the clock worked and was normally a blue light). Behind the clock digits was a faery [sic] face. A faery then flew out of the video in a shower of green light and flew round the room. Behind it was another which also flew out followed by more. They were all lining up one behind the other and came out in single file.'<sup>52</sup> But the vast majority of encounters take place outdoors in the countryside. Woodland is popular, about forty-three accounts take place there, and also in country lanes and hedgerows, fields and near water courses. And perhaps it would be expected to see fairy entities at or near ancient sites, of which there are many in this country, imbued through folklore with ancient magic:

My husband and I were having a hike in the area, near Morvah [village in Cornwall, near St. Ives]. We had parked the car and walked to the *Men-an-Tol*, then down to the *Men Scryfa* which is a standing stone dating from the early medieval period. We were going back to the track to head up to the *Nine Maidens* stone circle, when we saw a man running down the hill. When I say run, think of those dreams when the land flies beneath you with each step; he was moving like this over the heathy ground. He stopped and looked at us, and my husband waved. He grinned and waved back, then continued to run at this incredible pace in an easterly direction until he was out of sight. ... and husband and I chatted about how strange he had looked whilst we reached the top of the hill and the *Nine Maidens*. As we reached the site, the weather began to change; from being a clear sunny day, a strong wind blew up from the west and brought with it a fair deal of cloud and

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<sup>51</sup> Fairy Census, vol. i, op.cit., Ss12, p.39

<sup>52</sup> ibid, Ss 124, p.147

fog. There was a purple/grey hue to this. We explored the circle for a few minutes and joked about having gone through a portal. As soon as we stepped out of the circle, the wind died down, the clouds cleared, and it was a bright sunny day again.<sup>53</sup>

This experience is one of a few that bear the hallmarks of a traditional folkloric encounter, the changing of the weather when one enters into a liminal space, like a stone circle. Some encounters have also taken place with the participant watching from inside their home with the entity outside, and several have occurred with the participant inside a car looking out: 'I was buckled into a seat in the back of my granddad's car waiting for my sister to join us I watched a creature in the hedgerow at the side of the road hovering around the blackberries.'<sup>54</sup> 'We were in the car it was January around 5 pm so dark. Something about two-feet tall, white and willowy, floaty jumped out of the hedgerow in front of our car then disappeared.'<sup>55</sup> 'I was just leaving Glastonbury on a lovely summer day we had had a lovely weekend at the Glastonbury symposium in the town hall. I turned onto the road and there in front of me was a creature. Looked like a little man made of twigs. I saw it but didn't stop the car or anything, no time and then he was gone!'<sup>56</sup> 'Creature flew onto windscreen of car both driver and passenger in front saw it! Both said 'Omg that was a fucking fairy! Tiny but clear to see humanoid winged creature [as] it flew off!'<sup>57</sup> Each of these accounts are fleeting for the obvious reason that the car is speeding past the fairy being. Like so many of the accounts that take place outside, the encounter is a 'blink and you miss it' affair. However, one account takes place while the car is parked in a layby, late at night:

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<sup>53</sup> *ibid.*, Ss22, p.48

<sup>54</sup> *Fairy Census*, vol. i, op. cit. Ss21, p.47

<sup>55</sup> *ibid.* Ss24, p.51

<sup>56</sup> *Fairy Census*, vol. ii, op. cit., Ss578, p.122

<sup>57</sup> *Fairy Census*, vol. i, op. cit. Ss62A, p.81



‘It was around three in the morning, and my friend pulled into a layby on a lonely road to nap. He told me to wake him in fifteen minutes. While he slept, I sat quietly, watching the clock but I had a strong feeling that we were being watched from behind the car. I thought I would turn around, see nothing and be reassured. I turned and saw a figure, about three-feet high walking towards the car, peering in. He looked a [little] like a leprechaun...’<sup>58</sup>

## **Company**

Most of the participants in the encounter are alone, or with a dog, or other animals. Some are in company with one or more other people, but they are usually the only one that experiences it:

‘I was walking through the woodlands on \*\*\* Grounds with my family and at one point they had all walked ahead to look at something while I stood alone waiting for them. I watched them for a bit then, bored, I turned around and saw what looked like a tiny human, of about two inches in length, fly in front of me. It stopped when it reached my eye level and turned to look at me, before flying off again. It was completely white and glowed slightly and at the time, being a lover of Tinkerbell, I thought that was who I had seen. I have been back to the same place multiple times but have never had an experience like that again. At the time I told many people about the fairy I had seen but most people dismissed my sighting thinking it was my imagination. Even I sometimes doubt myself, but I’m trying to stay hopeful and am doing my own research into fairies to see if others have had similar experiences to me.’

This raises some interesting questions about the exogenous nature of accidental fairy encounters and also about the specialness of the participant. Why can they see, and the others cannot? Is it that the ‘chosen’ participant has some unconscious clairvoyant powers or sensitivities? Have the fairies themselves selected one person out of a group for a particular reason? Is it part of the trickster element of fairies, to reveal themselves only to one of a group, leaving that person open to ridicule and disbelief? Or maybe the others have shared the experience but have not wanted to share it or admit to it. Again, this would seem to indicate a

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<sup>58</sup> *ibid.* Ss96, p.118

reluctance in some people to accept an occurrence of this nature, for religious reasons perhaps, fear, psychological reasons, or simply disbelief. The teenager out with his father who saw a robed figure was quite disturbed and did not let his parent know what he had seen,<sup>59</sup> the father out with his two daughters, one of whom saw the green skinned children with white hair, never spoke of the event again.<sup>60</sup> We live in a peculiar culture that is constantly at odds with itself about what is real and what is not. Whichever part of culture we spend the most time in, it is easy to find an echo chamber of people who believe exactly what you believe, and almost equally to find a group who believe the exact opposite. And both groups have evidence to back up their claims. In general, though, at least at an official level, material science largely states that paranormal experiences do not exist (because they have not been proven via empirical means), yet there is still a huge popularity for stories of the paranormal. Richard Wiseman argues that the paranormal does not exist, but the fact that we have these kinds of experiences are still of interest psychologically and culturally.<sup>61</sup> He is one of the few however, from the scientific community who at least would like to engage with the phenomena, however, still taking side swipes at the people who maintain that the paranormal is real.<sup>62</sup> Given this continued sense of superiority held by some members of the scientific community, it is no wonder that some people do not want to share their experiences.

### **Time of day**

Any researcher, believer or practitioner of fairy belief knows that there are times during the day when fairies are more likely to be active than not. The liminal times, dawn, and twilight are probably the most popular, as is 'the witching hour' which according to reliable and unreliable sources, seems to occur at any time between midnight and 4am, has been linked to a 1535

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<sup>59</sup> Fairy Census, vol. ii, op. cit., Ss501, p.23

<sup>60</sup> Fairy Census, vol. i, op. cit., Ss68, p.85

<sup>61</sup> R. Wiseman, The supernatural and the brain, New Scientist, 2011, issue 2802

<sup>62</sup> R. Wiseman, Paranormality, Why we see what isn't there, 2011, p.2

edict of the Church in Europe, which forbade activities between three and four o'clock, and has appeared in Shakespeare (... 'tis now the very witching time of night, When Churchyards yawne, and hell it selfe breakes out Contagion to this world, *Hamlet*, Act 3, scene 2).<sup>63</sup> What is interesting and perhaps unsurprising, is that the majority of the encounters recorded in the FC took place during the distinctly non-liminal hours of 9 am and 6pm, (a hundred and two). Even allowing for the late sunrises and early sunsets of the winter, there are relatively fewer sightings taking place at dawn (fourteen), twilight (twenty-seven), and the witching hour (nineteen). Still, even these numbers show there is activity at those liminal times, but as has been discussed elsewhere in this thesis, people pretty much experience fairies wherever and whenever they please. Perhaps the next question is to ask whether there is any difference between the kinds of fairies seen at the different times of the day, and this will be explored in the following chapter. For the purposes of this chapter, is there anything in particular about the people who are having these encounters at such liminal times? Of the sixty accounts in the fairy census, by far the most were positive, or neutral, or no preference as to mood was offered. About 17% were either angry, threatening or generally negative, like the child at bedtime who saw the 'angry wolves' that later they identified as 'small men with lots of hair.' That must have been a disturbing thing to experience at bedtime.<sup>64</sup> Or the gnome angry at being pee'd on in the middle of the night by a weary camper.<sup>65</sup> Then there are the two young men who see a fairy, walking home in the dark, who 'didn't seem friendly.'<sup>66</sup> In the later census, recorded in the 2000s, there is another angry gnome, this time in a house where the carpet is being cleared out.<sup>67</sup> And another irascible little man who barges past a woman out for an evening walk with her dog in the 1990s.<sup>68</sup> Taken individually, these more negative accounts could be accentuated by the dark and the quiet of

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<sup>63</sup> Ostberg, R. (2022, November 30). witching hour. Encyclopedia Britannica. <https://www.britannica.com/topic/witching-hour>

<sup>64</sup> Fairy Census, vol. i., op. cit., Ss37, p.60

<sup>65</sup> Fairy Census, vol. i, op. cit., Ss 49, p.70

<sup>66</sup> *ibid.*, Ss 50, p.71

<sup>67</sup> Fairy Census, vol. ii, op. cit., Ss 536, p.63

<sup>68</sup> *ibid.*, Ss 538, p.66

night time. But on the whole, there is not much to show for a specific difference than at any other time of day. However, the account of the teenager who sees a cloaked figure and hears distorted fairy bells is probably more effective as he describes it, 'threatening' because it happened at dusk, and not in broad daylight.<sup>69</sup> It is a very atmospheric account, which might also represent the emotions the boy was feeling at the time, as he says in the survey that he was 'very sad.'

### **Duration**

The majority of encounters are a blink-and-you-miss-it affairs, often leaving the participants with an uncertainty as to whether they really saw what they saw or not. Many supernatural encounters are like this, largely because we do retain enough scepticism to think that our brains/senses can trick us. It recalls Scrooge's Cartesian reply to Jacob Marley's question in the first chapter of *A Christmas Carol* (1843), 'Why do you doubt your senses?' "Because" said Scrooge, "a little thing affects them. A slight disorder of the stomach makes them cheats. You may be an undigested bit of beef, a blot of mustard, a crumb of cheese, a fragment of an underdone potato. There's more of gravy than of grave about you, whatever you are!"<sup>70</sup> The duration of Scrooge's encounter is of some length, and he has plenty of time to get used to the phenomenon, but many of the real encounters are fleeting. There are eighty-four accounts from both FCs that take place in less than a minute. What is interesting though is how for most of them, it confirms, rather than belies what they had seen: 'Though I saw him from the corner of my eye, my impression was clear.' 'It stopped when it reached my eye level and turned to look at me, before flying off again...most people dismissed my sighting thinking it was my imagination. Even I sometimes doubt myself...' 'I just froze in disbelief and then after say ten seconds or so the fairy with no wings that I noticed walked over the top of the tree trunk stub

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<sup>69</sup> *ibid.*, Ss 501, p.23

<sup>70</sup> C. Dickens, *A Christmas Carol*, Chapman & Hall, London, 1843

and disappeared.’ ‘I clearly saw, out of the corner of my eye, a little person dressed in brown with brown skin perched on the end of the log...It was a flash of a few seconds.’ ‘It only lasted for a handful of seconds. It just casually walked away, back into the wood.’<sup>71</sup> It can be argued that this very fleetingness can add to the magic of the encounter. It can leave the participant with enough doubt as to whether it was a supernatural encounter or not, that causes them to believe. So, the real, fleeting experience is converted into belief. Once belief takes hold, the doubt starts to recede, and memory takes over. The general trend for the duration of the encounters tends to be for a few seconds, though there are encounters which take place for several minutes or even hours, and some that are repetitive over months and years.

### **Frequency of experiences**

Some of the participants share that they have had frequent supernatural experiences. In fact, the questionnaire that the FIS put online offers the choice between ‘rarely or never had supernatural experiences, occasional supernatural experiences and regularly has supernatural experiences.’ The latter two categories could raise some scepticism regarding the experiences, if someone has had supernatural encounters before, or has them often, the implication is that they are also a believer. If they are a believer, of course they are going to have seen supernatural entities, can talk about them knowledgeably and can use the appropriate language. This may be a prejudicial view, but it would be difficult to challenge a believer, that their fairy experience is a dragonfly, or a trick of the light. This is perhaps the most fundamental problem with collecting this kind of data, that in order to send it to a sympathetic reader (like Janet Bord or Marjorie Johnson), or even to fill in an anonymous online form on a website called ‘The Fairy Investigation Society,’ a certain amount of belief must be present. So even those people who have rarely or never had a supernatural experience must have a certain reserve of disbelief to want to share the experience. This is a conundrum, that the trust that the experience is a

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<sup>71</sup> Fairy Census, vol. ii, op. cit., Ss 608, p.162

genuine one is dependent on how little the participant should believe in it. David Hay and Kate Hunt tried to isolate this a little with their survey for the Religious Experience Research Centre (RERC), by explicitly choosing their participants on the basis that they had supernatural religious experiences but had no relationship with established religion. But they still had belief, just not mainstream religious belief.<sup>72</sup> If we want to be able to judge the plausibility of these encounters, how does one find examples of supernatural experiences occurring to neutral or even wholly disbelieving participants? Do we discard the participant who was 'gathering firewood for our Pagan ritual, when we saw a procession of tiny semi-transparent figures walking along the forest floor,' because they are more likely to believe that they are seeing what they are seeing? Or the example of the male who had several experiences over a period of a few nights, comprising 'fauns', 'auras', 'chi', 'sylphs', because he has had experiences before, and also because he knows the jargon and admits that 'I'd got myself into quite a clairvoyant state of mind' do we find his account less plausible?<sup>73</sup> In the end, perhaps it does not matter, whether they are believers or not. This thesis is not seeking to prove or disprove the existence of fairies, the veracity of the accounts or the believability, but to examine these accounts in terms of what they tell us about the participants, and what they tell us about the entities, and how these interactions are affected by and affect our culture, the accumulation of historical and folkloric record, and the continuing development and evolution of fairy belief. And in this way, staunch disbelievers, like Derren Brown, or Richard Wiseman, can still find it interesting to investigate 'a talking mongoose.'<sup>74</sup> In the FC, the majority of participants have had occasional supernatural experiences. In FC vol. I, it is half the cases, in FC vol. II it is more evenly spaced, but still 30%.

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<sup>72</sup> D. Hay, *Something there, The Biology of the Human Spirit*, 2006, p.46

<sup>73</sup> *Fairy Census*, vol. I, op. cit., Ss7, p.30

<sup>74</sup> R. Wiseman, op. cit., p.177

## **Mental and physical state of the participant**

Only about 15% of participants gave their emotional state at the time of the encounter, the majority feeling happy (nine), with equal numbers either sad (six) or tired (six). One participant chose 'adrenalin' possibly meaning they had been exercising or running. Three participants said they were under the influence of either alcohol, prescription medication or recreational drugs at the time of the encounter. As previously discussed, regarding veracity and belief, I do not think this undermines their accounts. Like the believers, it is the account that counts. Do the accounts where an external influence has been applied differ greatly from those without influence? Again, as with belief, it would be impossible and largely implausible to ascertain the cause of the encounter. That is not the point. If there is a marked difference, does it tell us anything new? In FC 1, there are three examples of accounts where the participants have admitted to being under the influence:

'I looked up and saw what I knew to be an elf lying along a branch in a large tree. The only thing which surprised me was how big he was, at least six foot tall. He was a dark colour, and he was laughing at me or rather laughing at the kids perhaps. He was 'lolling' along a branch and seemed part of the tree. I watched him for a bit but as soon as my mind started to focus on what I was looking at, he vanished.'

Another example:

'My friend and I initially both noticed an amorphous greyish shape on the ground about a hundred metres ahead. We thought it may have been a large dog, or possibly a deer. It shuffled under one of the large lower branches of a beech tree. It then morphed into the branch and emerged again. It had become two female figures. Each about three and a half to four feet tall. They both had long flowing dresses on and wings on their backs. They were making the branch rock and sway. They were also laughing. I could hear and feel the laughter which was very hypnotic and beautiful. It reminded me of a babbling brook. I pointed and asked my friend if he could see this and as soon as he looked in their direction they dissolved. I saw nothing further.'

And finally,

‘...We crossed the field to the corner where the stile at the end of a thorn or holly hedge ran...Except the stile was not there. That seemed odd, it had been there for years, so we looked along the hedge to see where it had moved too. No sign, so we retraced our steps to see if we’d made an error. Knowing something of folklore, I talked about being ‘Pixie-led’ and joked that we should turn our coats inside out to break the spell, but we both decided was too cold to even take our coats off. So, I said I’d heard that whistling was another method to reputedly break the spell, but us both being fans of M.R. James also ventured that whistles can sometimes also attract the wrong attention from the other side. That did not stop me whistling, however. Strangely, especially as this area is open area on the top of a hill and not really an echoey place, there was an echo of the whistling but not instantly. There was a short delay of only a second or so, but still noticeable where the whistle hung on the air and then returned, as if in mimicry rather than a bounce. ... suddenly there was a noise at the other end of the hedge, low down. It sounded like something charging at us breaking twigs all the while.’<sup>75</sup>

We are not told what kind of intoxicant the participants had taken, nor how much. The first two are very visual, short-lived and mostly typical of many of the other accounts, where people had not admitted to taking anything, or being drunk. The third is a pixie- led encounter, which are not as common, and some intoxication could be responsible for that, getting lost in open fields could be likely, but these men were not falling down drunk, and the mysterious sounds, the rustling, whistling and the final sound of something large but unseen coming towards them, excite more interest than writing it off as the result of too many beers. But in the end, intoxication or not, these three accounts are still interesting, still present us with entities that are common in folklore, unexpected in the area they appear in, and wholly unexpected by the participants. Eighteen participants had just woken up from a sleep. Being in the in between state of sleeping and waking could also influence the type of encounter. Is it a dream? Could the participants just be feeling groggy from sleep (a state similar to intoxication in some people)? There are also those who were bedridden because of illness or infirmity.

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<sup>75</sup> Fairy Census, vol. i, op. cit., Ss95, p.114-117



## Environmental state

A significant number of encounters happen by accident in the following ways: the participant(s) are on foot, walking through a secluded area of woodland and find a fairy, they are driving through the countryside and see the fairy in the hedgerow or otherwise by the side of the road (usually narrow, country lane or track), or, more rarely, are walking across open country and see the fairy on the edges of fields or meadows. Some encounters happen at campsites, which are usually quite rural and away from towns and villages. The reason behind these encounters is obvious – fairies are associated with the outdoors, with nature, in particular, in many cases, with trees and woodland. Fairies are often depicted in or around trees. They are also seen near water, particularly waterfalls, and riverbanks. So, in these instances, fairies are akin to rare sightings of wildlife. Just as it is a pleasant surprise to see a wild rabbit, deer, otter or hare, so it is with the fairies. The countryside is where they belong. Unexpected perhaps, but certainly not out of place. Most people who live in or visit the countryside, do so because they have certain expectations about what the countryside means. In the UK in particular, the countryside is seen as special, preservable, and in some cases, magical. Because so many of us are used to living in urban spaces, divorced from the rural, it takes a particular effort to visit the countryside. It is a ‘day out,’ with special equipment needed, and clothing. So, over the past couple of hundred years, the countryside has become a separate space from our dwellings and workplaces.<sup>76</sup>

Diane Purkiss recognises that this separation was not felt by our ancestors prior to the industrial revolution.<sup>77</sup> They were able to predict the weather, recognise which mushrooms were poisonous and which not, or which plants could cure a fever. But while our ancestors lived cheek by jowl with the woods, fields, meadows and riverbanks, there was still an inherent fear of ‘the dark.’ Purkiss asks us to imagine what real darkness means: no streetlights, headlights, floodlights, house lights, but instead, if you were lucky, weak and flickering rush lights and

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<sup>76</sup> Tulumello, S. (2024). Geographies of Fear. In: Warf, B. (eds) *The Encyclopedia of Human Geography*.

<sup>77</sup> D. Purkiss, *Troublesome Things*, op. cit., p.12-15

candlelight, flaring oil lanterns and travelling candles, fast-burning torches. The dark predominated our domestic and workspaces prior to the construction of our cities and towns. And the dark was not empty but teeming with monsters. Some of them animals: wolves, foxes, boars, badgers, and some of them otherworldly. Pre- industrial folklore is full of warnings about ‘the woods.’ Witches live in gingerbread houses (Hansel and Gretel), wolves dress up as Grandmothers (Little Red Riding Hood), Snow White encounters some harmless dwarves, but not before her stepmother’s henchman tries to murder her in the woods.<sup>78</sup> But beyond the fairy tales (that do not contain many fairies it should be noted), the woods are where the fairies have their revels. Fairies are mostly to be found in the woods for two reasons: they are often associated with the trees and plant life, especially mushrooms and fungi, and because woods are secluded and a good place to hide. What does this say about the people who see fairies? For some, but by no means all, seeing fairies, whether by accident or via clairvoyant or other magical means, cements a relationship with nature that is under threat from our modern lives, of rushing about in cars, living in concrete and tarmac, eating fast food or pre-prepared meals. First, making the effort to visit the countryside in the first place, second, connecting with the place by walking through it, and thirdly by encountering a supernatural being that is both unexpected but completely at home in that environment. There are two aspects to the data on the effect the encounter has on the person and the environment, as respondents were allowed more than one answer out of nine choices. Out of one hundred and forty accounts, a massive one hundred and sixteen participants believed that the encounter was a personal ‘display put on especially for them.’<sup>79</sup> Most participants only used one or two of the descriptors offered, while a fifth used four or more. The commonest descriptors were a sense of loss of time (forty-eight), and profound silence (nineteen). The commonest effects on the participants were that it stayed with them as a vivid memory (fifty-eight), and that it marked a turning point in their lives

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<sup>78</sup>The Brothers Grimm, *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs*, collected 1800s.

<sup>79</sup> *Fairy Census*, op. cit., p.11

(thirty-six), but nine respondents said that the memory of it became 'clouded.' There were some who felt a change in temperature: seven felt a chill, six felt a warmth. A very few had physical effects: tingling sensation (four), and hair standing on end (two).

### **The Covid 19 Pandemic 2019 -2021**

The two main lockdowns, which took place in England and Wales in 2020 and 2021 had different rules but still limited the amount of time spent outdoors, unless you had your own garden, and direct contact with other people. Most communication was going on online via social media and instant messaging. So, fairy accounts were also written rather than verbal. It will be interesting to see whether the experiences were any different because of our forced separation from people and natural spaces, whether, due to the rather frightening and depressing nature of a pandemic, which at the start had no cure and no vaccine, and where the daily death tolls were reported grimly on the News and showed no sign of abating. It may be both a positive and negative experience, there was certainly a lot of creativity and optimism going on, if social media is anything to go by, but also, it was a scary and ominous time where death seemed to be lurking around every corner. Other people were a danger. In Boccaccio's Decameron, written during the fourteenth century European pandemic of the Great Plague, it is interesting to note some of the similarities of human behaviour then as now, the conspiracy theories, the anti-vaxxers, the profiteers, the deniers, the rich and poor divides, the partygoers, the snake oil salespeople. There are nine accounts in the second volume of the Fairy Census that must have taken place during and immediately after the Covid pandemic. Lockdown and the subsequent controlled meetings seemed to cause simultaneously a period of great creativity, but also crises in mental health. Could this also be a time when supernatural encounters occur? None of the participants mention the pandemic, so maybe it did not really make a difference to the experience, and these nine examples do not seem to be very different from the encounters that took place in other times. Three of the encounters express quite a

neutral tone, three express sadness and the remaining three are quite positive, even happy. All of them are reported by adults apart from one, where the participant is aged between eleven and twenty years old. This encounter is relayed by a third person, who was texted by the participant in a panic, believing that she was being harassed by ghost. It is the tale teller who identifies it instead as a fairy, 'being well versed in fairy lore' and suggests a well-known fairy charm, which is to turn one's clothes inside out. The participant followed this instruction, and the entity went away and calm was restored.<sup>80</sup> It might be interesting in the years to come to see if more research can be done on the effects of the pandemic and lockdown on supernatural experiences. There has certainly been a rush to put out papers about religious and spiritual effects and experiences during the pandemic. Kate Ray, writing in a recent social media post, talked about the depth of spiritual and supernatural activity during this time. As a professional ghost hunter and medium, who has had many encounters with supernatural creatures, including fairies and fairy like beings, Fay had become aware of more supernatural activity than usual occurring in and around her spaces during the lockdowns.<sup>81</sup> A recent survey conducted in 2023 showed a renewed connection with spirituality and religion during the lockdowns, focusing largely on general feelings of well-being, renewed social connections, reflections on death, including near death experiences, and one or two examples of meeting a supernatural entity:

'I saw a tall shadow/person watching me from the bedroom door, was taller than the door itself, and was hiding and coming out. I'm 100 percent sure that I was awake. It was an experience that lasted a couple of hours. Also, before that, my grandma was taken to the hospital, and I had a vivid dream where she was becoming light and asked me to take her hand and help her until she reached the light, I did, until she became light and my hand was light too.'<sup>82</sup>

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<sup>80</sup> Fairy Census, vol. ii., op. cit. Ss503A, p.24

<sup>81</sup> Private conversation with Kate Ray on social media 2025

<sup>82</sup> Schmidt, B. E., & Stockly, K. (2023). The Fruits of Spiritual Experiences during the Pandemic: COVID-19 and the Effects of Non-Ordinary Experiences. *Interdisciplinary Journal for Religion and Transformation in Contemporary Society*, 10(1), 223-251.

In examining these accidental encounters (I shall look at the endogenous examples in a later chapter), it is important to pay attention to the language the participant uses to describe the event. For all encounters, regardless of provenance, however, what is important is what the fairy encounter meant to the participant. For some, it may have confirmed a belief in the supernatural, whether fairy specific or not, that they already held, or, it may have caused them to begin to have supernatural beliefs that they had not previously considered. It may have even been a part of or a reminder of childhood and invoked nostalgia for that period in life. A small sample of those people who expressed their feelings, from the FIS FC, show an equal amount of positive and negative reactions, and some neutral and pragmatic: ‘very important to my life, no matter what is said, I will always believe.’ ‘Elated. That moment changed my life.’ ‘They helped me heal.’ ‘Really lucky that we witnessed such a thing.’ ‘Sense of calm and peace fell upon me.’ ‘The only memory I have of being this small and I am glad it is.’ ‘Their laughter was felt in my whole being.’ ‘We were both of us highly tuned into the environment.’ ‘I wish I could see them so clearly again.’ ‘I felt the Green Man was there of his own free will, to look after me.’ ‘I always felt honoured that I saw what I did.’ ‘[Writing about it] makes me feel less lonely.’ ‘[Gave me] my love of fairies thereafter.’ ‘I’d love to hear the music again.’<sup>83</sup> Some of the accounts I have classed as neutral as they express the fact that it was unforgettable, but without saying in a good or bad way: ‘the events will stay with me forever.’ ‘I will never forget my time with her.’ ‘I never forgot it. I don’t mind talking about it now I am older as I feel more enlightened.’<sup>84</sup> Others that I have classed as neutral contain a desire to be believed or a fear of not being believed: ‘I don’t think I imagined my encounter. It wasn’t what I wanted or expected to see.’ ‘[I’m] not prone to exaggerated story telling.’ ‘[She] swore till her dying day she was telling the truth.’ ‘Most folk would think I’m nuts.’ ‘Never told anyone for fear of being ridiculed.’ ‘People thought I was making it up for attention.’ ‘[I was] angry at being dismissed.’<sup>85</sup> One participant was quite

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<sup>83</sup> S. Young, *Fairy Census* vol. I, op. cit.

<sup>84</sup> *ibid*

<sup>85</sup> *ibid*

detached: 'Very interesting.' While another seemed to hint at their whole belief system overturned in very detached language: 'I'm a pragmatic scientist atheist (or was).'<sup>86</sup>

Finally, there are those who found the encounter negative, even frightening, not wanting it to be repeated: 'confusion and disbelief,' it frightened me enough not to want to see another.' 'We were quite frightened.' 'Scary, but mesmerising.' 'Beautiful, but with a slightly sinister feeling.' 'Don't mess with them...they will kick your ass!' 'Actually, got quite scared when staring at them.' 'I was rather frightened.' There are many aspects to the people who have had fairy encounters, and I have at least scratched the surface, though there are many other features of the data that could equally be examined. I have tended to go for the experience and the background, the human data that explains the age, gender and location of the encounter, and where possible the effect the encounter had on them. There are many who will call them deluded, attention-seeking, liars. But that is shortsighted, and quite unfair. Many people have experiences that cannot be explained by the material world, and they may justify their experience through psychology or psychiatry. And I am not saying that the possibility of serious psychological issues are not present here, in some of the accounts. But, having the opportunity to interpret the world according to how we experience it is surely preferable to a blanket denial that it even took place?

This chapter has shown the many and varied experiences that have occurred to the many and varied participants, revealing the many different responses to the question of what fairies are. The participant responses, however, also give an indication of the culture and usages in which the encounters took place. In the next chapter, I will be examining the fairy entities themselves, looking at what they are, what they do, how they appear and interact with the human observers. To see if we can understand these entities themselves.

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<sup>86</sup> *ibid*







## Chapter Four

### Seeing Fairies

The Fairy Census, the first published scholarly survey of contemporary fairy sightings ... gathered almost five hundred different fairy experiences from Britain and Ireland and beyond from people who had striking and sometimes life-changing meetings with the 'little people'...

Simon Young<sup>1</sup>

Creature flew onto windscreen of car, both driver and passenger in front saw it!

Both said, 'Omg that was a fu\*\*\*\*g fairy!'

Fairy Census ss62A<sup>2</sup>

It could be possible to compile a picture of fairies from folklore and folk or fairy tales, but what the encounters discussed in this thesis, give us more immediate witness statements to encounters that the participants have experienced. The recorded fairy encounters in surveys and books that have been collected over the twentieth and twenty-first centuries give a wide-ranging insight into the nature and personality of fairies; what they are and how they affect and are affected by culture according to real people from a diversity of backgrounds.

Until the eighteenth century at least, the general consensus was to avoid contact with the fairies. The tales of abductions, substitutions, curses to illness or death, are rife amongst the folklore of the Medieval and Early Modern period, and even with the Romantic revival of fairy belief, there is still a hint of caution which carries on into the nineteenth century. The rise of Spiritualism and Theosophy in the middle of the eighteenth century sees the beginning of a gradual split between the traditional folklore fairies, the subjects of folktales and literature, and the spiritualised beings that can be perceived with a clairvoyant mind. Fairies as elementals are

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<sup>1</sup> C. Houlbrook and S. Young eds., *Magical Folk*: op. cit., p.11

<sup>2</sup> S. Young, *The Fairy Census* vol. i: op. cit., p.81-82

not new at this time, but these elemental types that are believed, principally by Theosophists, to possess the function of ‘driving nature,’<sup>3</sup> are different from the courtly fairies of the Medieval period, the demonic types of the Early Modern period, and the solitary types encountered in lonely places of the countryside in the seventeen and eighteen hundreds. Elementals of this nature are not encountered haphazardly while out walking. Geoffrey Hodson, who encountered fairies and fairy-like beings in various natural places on his tour of the British Isles in the 1920s, was able to see them through clairvoyant means whenever he wants, though not wherever.<sup>4</sup> In general though, the Theosophical kinds of fairies are summonable, and dismissible. They are human controlled. And they seem to be growing in popularity via fairy practitioners and fairy festivals.<sup>5</sup> However, the encounters in the data collected in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries seem to be moving back to the pre-Victorian idea that the fairies will meet you or be seen by you by accident, on their turf.<sup>6</sup> What is creeping into the data collected since 2017, are accounts of people meditating or taking part in spiritualist-type sittings in order to contact the fairies, or experiencing the fairies through dreams, and these types of endogenous encounter are occurring and growing in popularity. This was my own experience of a fairy encounter, and I have relayed it at the beginning of this thesis. I will look more closely at the nature of these types of communication with the fairies in later chapters, on ‘Fairy Spirituality’ and ‘Fairy Practitioners.’ For the purposes of this chapter, the fairies encountered are largely accidental and exogenous which are still the most documented kind of encounter.

Anybody even with only a cursory interest in fairies will have an idea of what a fairy looks like, whether they have seen one or not. Descriptions of fairies come to us from the earliest writings,

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<sup>3</sup> G. Hodson, *Fairies at work and play*, op. cit., p.13

<sup>4</sup> G. Hodson, *Fairies at Work and Play*, 1925, op.cit., p.14

<sup>5</sup> Fairy practitioners, like Karen Kay encourage people to contact the fairies through creative visualisation at her workshops, or via her oracle cards.

<sup>6</sup> In Simon Young’s *Fairy Census*, vol i and ii (2017, 2024), most of the participants come across their fairy encounters by accident. In vol. ii some are beginning to encounter fairies endogenously, but those recording this type of encounter in the census are still in single figures.

collected folklore accounts (which may date back centuries through oral tradition), historical accounts of real encounters, and documented modern day encounters. However, art and literature have also contributed to these descriptions, and latterly, so have cinema and television. The accumulation of fairy experiences that has built up over the centuries since Anglo-Saxon times, though not exhaustive, arguably shows a kind of evolution of fairy appearance. Interestingly, and perhaps conveniently, the earliest fairies<sup>7</sup> of the early Middle Ages are either invisible, barely, or rarely seen. Their presence is made known via music, sounds of voices, elf-shot,<sup>8</sup> helpful activity such as reaping crops, mischievous activity such as stealing crops, and blink-and-you-miss-it sightings.<sup>9</sup> In the later Middle Ages, fairies became more visible, solid, even human in their appearance and provenance, mostly thanks to the Arthurian and related legends.<sup>10</sup> But these are not the only manifestation of fairies in this era. There are also tales of fairy courts, hunts, and Kings and Queens.<sup>11</sup> Fairies are more visible at this time, even approachable for help, and accounts arise of people having visions of Fairyland and strong visual encounters.<sup>12</sup> People are also being stolen away by the fairies, sometimes returned, and sometimes not.<sup>13</sup> In the Early Modern period fairies come into their own as the ‘little people’ with some supernatural power and mostly as mischievous or downright dangerous. While art and literature have always told tales of the fairies, by the eighteenth century, literature especially begins to take over, as well as intellectual interest in folklore, in defining and describing fairies.<sup>14</sup> This then leads to the theatrical performances of the Victorian period, the advent of electricity, and then the arrival of photography and cinema, and with grateful thanks to Walt Disney and Peter Jackson et al, the cartoons and films. Looking

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<sup>7</sup> The ‘start date’ for fairy belief in Britain will be discussed in the introduction.

<sup>8</sup> See Chapter 1, *The History of Fairy Belief*, for a more detailed explanation of elf-shot.

<sup>9</sup> A. Hall, *Elves in Anglo Saxon England*, op. cit., p.11

<sup>10</sup> R. F. Green, *Elf Queens and Holy Friars*, 2016, op. cit., p.5

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, p.17

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, p.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, p.14

<sup>14</sup> P. Burke, *History and Folklore, a Historiographical Survey*, *Folklore*, 115/2 (2004), 133 – 139

forwards, there are already AI fairy generators online,<sup>15</sup> social media also offers to make you into a fairy if you supply a photo, though perhaps one should be wary of giving permission to use photographs in deep fakes, which while in this case may seem harmless, the more obvious and widespread use should not be encouraged. But while the methods of illustrating and representing the fairies have evolved, fairies and fairy-like beings have not really changed in appearance all that much. The biggest changes, across a millennium, are size, substance and wings.

In this section, I will present and discuss, via data collected and mostly referring to the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, the physical appearance of fairies, including their clothing and accessories, facial features and body shape, the significant ‘what’ of the fairy encounter. The most notable finding of all of these data is that people experience fairies in many different shapes and sizes, from all of the periods of history and tradition, yet there are common features from each of the five categories that are set out below, according to my own classification. Every fairy student has addressed the notion of a fairy taxonomy. Some have come up with many hundred species of fairy, some only a few, and some avoid the idea of it altogether.<sup>16</sup> None of these taxonomies, including mine, are exhaustive nor definitive, but in order to be helpful and to loosely follow my historical perspective, I have classified them into five wide categories that also correspond loosely with the chronological descriptions of fairies, since Anglo-Saxon times:

- i) invisible, barely or rarely seen, voices and music;
- ii) beautiful, human/human-sized, mostly female, regal;
- iii) lights;

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<sup>15</sup> [openart.ai/generator/fairy?msockid=373689904e10692421559aa64feb6814](https://openart.ai/generator/fairy?msockid=373689904e10692421559aa64feb6814) here are many picture generators online, this one claims to be the best:

[www.openart.ai/generator/fairy?msockid=373689904e10692421559aa64feb6814](https://www.openart.ai/generator/fairy?msockid=373689904e10692421559aa64feb6814) accessed July 2025

<sup>16</sup> S. Young and C. Woodyard, Boggart and Banshee Podcast, 2024, op. cit., S3, ep.12

- iv) little, ugly, mostly male;
- v) tiny, mostly female, beautiful, with wings;

These categories seem the most obvious, but there are some accounts that do not really fit into even these broad categories, and where that happens, I have tried to represent them on their own. In particular is a subset of ‘tree entities’ that occur more than once in the Fairy Census. The only reason that I can see for their inclusion in a fairy census, is the affiliation of fairies with trees and woodland. And though those fairy types are perhaps more likely to be of classical origin, such as ‘*hamadryads*,’<sup>17</sup> and not these creatures who while differing in other aspects, share the features of having twigs or branches growing out of their bodies.<sup>18</sup>

#### **i) Invisible, barely, or rarely seen, voices and music**

In Anglo-Saxon times, elves (*aelves*) were either ‘invisible or hard to see creatures,’<sup>19</sup> and also, drawing on Norse mythology, they were, ‘lesser spirits than the *Aesir*, but with similar armaments in spears and arrows.’<sup>20</sup> Evidence of elf shot was attributed to the neolithic arrow or axe heads often discovered near to dwellings, or in animal grazing areas. This ‘proof’ was still being attributed to fairies up until the twentieth century in some remote areas of Scotland.<sup>21</sup> Belief in elf-shot and its supernatural origins was so strong in the Anglo-Saxon period, that it is in surviving medical journals that remedies for elf-shot cattle and indeed people, are to be found, and not only in folk tales or poetry.<sup>22</sup> I have already documented in detail an example of a pixey-led encounter in August 2022 in a previous chapter, but the most recent account of unseen fairy mischief went viral on social media, when a woman got lost in a wood and heard a high pitched, disembodied voice calling her, leading her this way and that, and laughing.

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<sup>17</sup> who were an integral part of their trees, such that if the tree died, the hamadryad associated with it also died

<sup>18</sup> S. Young, *Fairy Census* vol. i and vol. ii, various accounts.

<sup>19</sup> K. Jolly, *Popular Religion in Late Saxon England: Elf Charms in Context*, 1998, p.134

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, p.135

<sup>21</sup> A. Hall, *Elves in Anglo-Saxon England*, op. cit., p.167

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, p.6-8

Another couple felt ‘the presence of something faerie, and we felt as if we had been pixey-led in the woods’.<sup>23</sup> Disembodied voices also occur in the data, some coming from underground: voices asking for help with a farming tool,<sup>24</sup> and voices coming from inside Pudding Pye Hill near Thirsk.<sup>25</sup> There are voices heard across Dartmoor, calling “Tommy, Tommy, Tommy!”<sup>26</sup>, invisible fairies crying over a broken churn staff,<sup>27</sup> a voice from a poacher’s bag begging to be set free (the poacher thought he’d caught a hare),<sup>28</sup> strange, mischievous voices in the garden,<sup>29</sup> ‘a childlike voice warning others that we were near, it uttered something like, ‘shh, they’re coming.’<sup>30</sup> Some fairies make their presence known by helpful acts or gifts. Houlbrook and Young record ‘pixie voices heard’ and treasures left behind,<sup>31</sup> and some ‘pixies’ cooking food and tidying up the house, during the night,<sup>32</sup> and food, especially butter, being left as a gift in exchange for help.<sup>33</sup> Of course, there are negative examples, the elf-shot that causes harm to animals and people has already been mentioned, and there are accounts of farming tools vanishing in the night and strange voices,<sup>34</sup> or various objects being stolen or thrown.<sup>35</sup> There have been other fleeting sightings. Some people have caught sight of a fairy, only for it to disappear almost immediately. One participant saw ‘a small silhouette with a rounded hat move across the light of a garden lamp,’<sup>36</sup> another saw ‘a small shape with his hands on his hips, humanoid, the size of a toddler... a silhouette framed by a strange, faint light.’<sup>37</sup> Sometimes it is just a ‘sense or feeling not to enter a wood,’<sup>38</sup> and maybe this should have been heeded by the

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<sup>23</sup> S. Young, *Fairy Census*, vol. i, op. cit., Ss130., p.154

<sup>24</sup> C. Houlbrook and S. Young (eds.), *Magical Folk*, op. cit., p. 40

<sup>25</sup> *ibid.*, p.56

<sup>26</sup> M. Johnson, *Seeing Fairies*, 2014, p.25

<sup>27</sup> Houlbrook and Young, op. cit. p.87

<sup>28</sup> *ibid.* p.88

<sup>29</sup> *ibid.* p.37

<sup>30</sup> S. Young, *Fairy Census*, op. cit., Ss44, p.67

<sup>31</sup> Houlbrook and Young, op. cit. p.46

<sup>32</sup> *ibid.* p.52

<sup>33</sup> J. Bord, *Fairies: Real Encounters with Little People*, 1998, op. cit. p.18 – 19

<sup>34</sup> D. Tame, *Real Faeries*, op. cit., p.32

<sup>35</sup> J. Bord, op. cit., p.13

<sup>36</sup> S. Pike, *Faery Tale*, op.cit., p.102

<sup>37</sup> S. Young, *Fairy Census*, op. cit., Ss49, p.70-71

<sup>38</sup> Houlbrook and Young, op. cit., p.53

man who went into a wood when he should not have and got pushed off a boulder by invisible hands.<sup>39</sup> Finally, there are those fairies who merely pass by whistling, like the seven whistlers from Worcester.<sup>40</sup> All of these accounts chime with the oldest recorded fairy belief in England, that Hall has documented.<sup>41</sup> They are mysterious and fleeting, in keeping with the nature of many other kinds of supernatural experiences. They indicate that fairies may not want to be seen, or that the consciousness required to see them (Hodson talks about ‘tuning in’ to a fairy wavelength that is different from ordinary consciousness<sup>42</sup>) is precarious. Some of the events are clearly designed to trick or confuse the human participant, so there is a sense of deliberate mischief, even malevolence, or perhaps just a security measure for those who stumble into a protected fairy area, like the woman in the wood, or the man pushed off a boulder. These explanations certainly fit in with traditional folktales.

Quite a few of the encounters involve music. Maybe fairy music deserves its own category, given that it does not seem to involve an actual entity, fairy or otherwise. The examples of fairy music seem to imply an opening between the human and fairy realms: Janet Bord records an encounter on Dartmoor in 1922, a doctor and his friends were camping and heard the music ‘overhead, faint as a breath. It died away, came back louder, over me, swaying like a censer that dips. It lasted twenty minutes... This music was essentially harmonic, not a melody or an air. It sounded like the weaving together of tenuous fairy sounds.’<sup>43</sup> The Fairy Census also has accounts of fairy music, ‘a very beautiful tinkling sound that came in waves from the garden...’<sup>44</sup> and ‘...what I heard was not like any music I’ve come across before... hard to describe.’<sup>45</sup> And ‘the most beautiful music; it seemed to come and go on the breeze...a circular tune, plaintive

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<sup>39</sup> *ibid.*, p.53

<sup>40</sup> *ibid.*, p.40

<sup>41</sup> A. Hall, *op. cit.*, p.7

<sup>42</sup> G. Hodson, *Fairies at Work and Play*, *op. cit.*, p.13

<sup>43</sup> J. Bord, *Fairies, Real Encounters with Little People*, *op. cit.*, p.13

<sup>44</sup> S. Young, *Fairy Census*, vol.i., *op. cit.*, Ss48, p.69-70

<sup>45</sup> *ibid.*, Ss73, p.89

but joyful. It could have been a flute or a pipe.<sup>46</sup> And another moorland experience, from Cornwall, 1999, 'I awoke in the night. It was after midnight around three a.m., and I heard what sounded like an angelic choir singing. ...It sounded like it was coming from [the] nearby moor. The night was very clear and still, no wind or rain...It was also other-worldly sounding...There are so many stone circles, cairns and standing stones on \*\*\* Moor, a very ancient and sacred landscape.'<sup>47</sup> None of these examples has a source, or at least an investigation of one. They have in common the fact that the sound is carried on the air and seems to come and go, which as a feature of a supernatural encounter does seem to be a little precarious. A clear, still night across open land would certainly help to convey sounds from far away, but the participants all seem to identify the music as not human, while being quite vague as to what that might mean. Chris Woodyard does wonder how many of these experiences are unknown animal or bird calls.<sup>48</sup> They could certainly be flute or pipe-like, even 'otherworldly,' perhaps, repetitive, maybe. It is certainly a valid explanation, as Woodyard asserts, according to Marjorie Johnson, there are similar 'calls' recorded, in the same places, which could also indicate the presence of wildlife.<sup>49</sup> It could, however, also indicate the presence of fairies. Similarly, there are voices heard from inside hills or barrows. Medieval and Early Modern fairies are presumed to live underground, hence the folklore often prohibiting walking on tumuli, fairy forts, ancient barrows, and more commonly, fairy rings, in case you disappear into fairyland.<sup>50</sup> But this kind of encounter has not been seen in modern accounts, though one participant recounted meeting a Cornish 'Buckadu' in their garden when he was a small child.<sup>51</sup> Usually, the Buckadu is a miner fairy, or 'Bucca' as accounted for by Briggs.<sup>52</sup> These fairies had set up home in the Cornish tin mines. They came also to be known as 'Knockers' as they would make their presence felt to the

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<sup>46</sup> *ibid.*, s87, p.102

<sup>47</sup> S. Young, *Fairy Census*, vol. ii, op. cit., Ss509, p.31-32

<sup>48</sup> C. Woodyard and Simon Young, *The Boggart and Banshee Podcast*, Season 4, episode 4, February 2025

<sup>49</sup> M. Johnson, *Seeing Fairies*, op. cit., p.15

<sup>50</sup> K. Briggs, *The Vanishing People*, 1978, p.11

<sup>51</sup> S. Young, *Fairy Census*, vol. i, op. cit., Ss26, p.51-52

<sup>52</sup> K. Briggs, *Dictionary of fairies: Hobgoblins, Brownies, Bogies, and Other Supernatural Creatures*, 1971, p.50



human miners by banging or knocking, 'lead[ing] the miners to the best lodes as well as giving warning of impending disaster.'<sup>53</sup>

And there are other species of largely unseen fairies. In the North of England, the Brownie is a commonly known helpful fairy who will perform household duties while the humans sleep, in exchange for gifts of food: bread, honey and milk are the most preferred. Again, there are no accounts of fairies doing chores for gifts in the modern encounters. The Fairy Census records three accounts where the participants call their entities Brownies, but they do not show Brownie attributes, that of doing housework and remaining out of sight. Judging by the descriptions from the observers, they are equating the name to the kind of little man, without wings, similar to a pixie, sprite or gnome.<sup>54</sup> The latter of these three accounts, however, does relate the naming of the entity as a Brownie, 'since s/he was resident in a cupboard.'<sup>55</sup> Perhaps a rather tenuous link to the traditional heritage, that of a house or specifically kitchen fairy, but nevertheless! Boggarts are also common in the North. Many folklorists have found that at least in the areas where this term is used, it tends to mean 'a generic name for an apparition'<sup>56</sup> 'any ambivalent or evil solitary supernatural spirit'<sup>57</sup> or indeed it 'might have been used to refer to anything from a hilltop hobgoblin to a household *faerie*, from a headless apparition to a proto-typical poltergeist'.<sup>58</sup> Boggarts delight in moving, throwing and breaking things, especially those that make a noise. Sometimes they are mistaken for poltergeists. The main difference, recognised by a range of studies in the supernatural, is that poltergeists are usually an unquiet spirit, or in some cases, the manifestation of adolescent feelings.<sup>59</sup> They have a purpose it would seem, to attract attention, or to have something resolved on the human level.<sup>60</sup> Boggarts

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<sup>53</sup> K. Briggs, op. cit. p.84

<sup>54</sup> S. Young, Fairy Census, vol. i and ii., op. cit., Ss12, Ss75 and Ss517 pp.39, 90, 40-42

<sup>55</sup> ibid., Ss517, 40

<sup>56</sup> Wright, Elizabeth Mary, Rustic Speech and Folklore (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1918), p.192

<sup>57</sup> Young, Simon (2022) *The Boggart: Folklore, History, Place names and Dialect*. Exeter: University of Exeter Press, p.7

<sup>58</sup> K. Roberts, Haunted Halifax and District (Stroud: History Press, 2014), p. 52

<sup>59</sup> Fodor, N. (1948) The Poltergeist Psychoanalyzed. *Psychiatric Quarterly* 22: 195–203.

<sup>60</sup> Fodor, N. (1964). *Between Two Worlds*. West Nyack, NY: Parker Publishing, p.145

just like to smash. Many accounts of Boggart interference tend to come from older encounters, and luckily, Simon Young has collected several hundred accounts of Boggart folklore from the North of England, some of which indicate some Boggart activity going on in the 20<sup>th</sup> Century.<sup>61</sup> Young limited the accounts from the 1970s and older, probably because he did not think that Boggarts would have much popularity in later decades.<sup>62</sup> In many of these accounts, the Boggart is being used as a threat to children if they misbehave, go astray or stay out late. And also, in the same way that Gremlins tend to be used nowadays, beings which also have an interesting etymological history.<sup>63</sup> Several of the accounts also incorporate other well-known entities, like this one, from Lancashire: ‘...My father used to tell us that Jinny Greenteeth, the Boggart of Fairfield Wells would come and get us if we didn’t behave. [FB user added: My gran used to scare me with someone called Velvet Ellen as well as Jinny Greenteeth.]’<sup>64</sup> Jinny or Jenny Greenteeth is fairly well known in Lancashire folklore as an aquatic creature that pulls or lures children to their deaths if they get too close to the edge. She is not often classified as a Boggart, though, whose *modus operandi* is as a shapeshifter, which Jenny is not known for.<sup>65</sup> There are some accounts from the Fairy Census of beings designated as ‘mischievous,’ often just as a description of their facial expressions. But traditional boggarts are more motivated.

## ii) Lights

On stage in Edwardian England, J. M. Barrie’s Tinkerbell, the fairy from the play *Peter Pan*, was originally portrayed ‘by a small mirror held in the hand off-stage and reflecting a little circle of light from a powerful lamp, and her voice was a collar of bells and two special ones that Barrie brought from Switzerland’.<sup>66</sup> Some fairy encounters relate only a disembodied light or lights,

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<sup>61</sup> S. Young, *The Boggart*, 2022

<sup>62</sup> S. Young, *The Boggart Source Book*, Exeter, 2022

<sup>63</sup> The term ‘Gremlins’ seems to have originated during the war amongst Air Force Pilots. Of course, they were then fictionalised in the 1984 feature film of the same name, equating with ‘real’ Chinese folklore creatures, the Mogwai. See also, C. Rose, *Encyclopedia of Spirits, Fairies, Gnomes and Goblins*, 1996

<sup>64</sup> S. Young, *The Boggart Source Book*, op. cit., ‘Audenshaw 1 (La). 1950s/F/FG., pp.2-10-19

<sup>65</sup> Katharine Briggs, op. cit., “Jenny Greenteeth”, p 242.

<sup>66</sup> R. Lancelyn Green, *Fifty Years of Peter Pan* (Peter Davies, 1954), J. M. Barrie (Bodley Head, 1960), p.33

with the viewer interpreting it as a fairy, others, that the luminescence surrounds the fairy being, like an aura, or that it is part of the fairy's skin or clothing.<sup>67</sup> Sometimes, the light acts as a presage to the arrival of the fairy, dimming or coalescing into the fairy being itself.<sup>68</sup> Light is a fairly recent association with fairies, coming with the invention of electricity in the Victorian era, however there were forms of natural light that also came to be associated with fairies much earlier, like the Willow the Wisp, Hobany's Lantern, and the Jack o' Lantern (which eventually moved over to Hallowe'en as a repellent against evil spirits, and then ironically in popular culture at least, as associated with the devil).<sup>69</sup> Many of the accounts in the data collection are ball-shaped, little, pinpricks, flying, and there are usually many of them.<sup>70</sup> Some are also accompanied by 'tinkling,' and 'pan pipes', which seems to reinforce the encounter as a fairy one, as the kind of music associated with the lights is that also associated with fairies.<sup>71</sup> Sometimes the lights are static and glowing.<sup>72</sup> Often, the lights are seen in or around trees, bushes and clumps of flowers.<sup>73</sup> Two girls set a fairy trap and hear bells and see 'darting lights outside the window. They were in the colours of green, orange, red, blue and gold... After that, the jingling sounds started again (louder this time) along with the flashing lights that looked like bright, glowing orbs, before finally all the activity stopped.'<sup>74</sup> A very few also communicate, like 'the ball of light [that] floated in through the bedroom door and hovered right in front of me. [It said], 'my name is Effeny and I am very yellow.' [It was] a ball of light with something moving inside.'<sup>75</sup> Or 'a small very light presence, about a foot high and it spoke to me.'<sup>76</sup> Sometimes, something else is believed to trigger the fairy event, like the teenager reading Shakespeare's *The*

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<sup>67</sup> Various examples from vol. i of the Fairy Census, 2017

<sup>68</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>69</sup> The History of 'Jack-O'-Lantern, 2018, [www.merriam-webster.com/wordplay/the-history-of-jack-o-lantern](http://www.merriam-webster.com/wordplay/the-history-of-jack-o-lantern) accessed July 2025

<sup>70</sup> S. Young, *The Fairy Census*, vol. i and ii, op. cit., various examples.

<sup>71</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>72</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>73</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>74</sup> S. Young, *Fairy Census*, vol. i and ii., op. cit.

<sup>75</sup> *ibid.*, Ss117, p.141

<sup>76</sup> *ibid.*, Ss127, pp.150-152

*Tempest*, and ‘it is said that when it is read, fairies will appear...I very suddenly felt as though someone or something was looking over my left shoulder, I turned my head very quickly and instinctively in time to see a burst of sparkly, twinkling lights, quite small, about the size of my hand, just behind and above my shoulder. It was sort of like the sparkles given out by a bonfire night sparkler, but the strange thing was it was as though the firework or light was imploding, rather than exploding in the normal way of things.’<sup>77</sup> There is a modern tradition in folklore, of certain ancient works of fiction (though no mention of *The Tempest*), including films and TV somehow being imbued with the ability to trigger supernatural events. It tends to be of the horror genre, and also the playing of Dungeons and Dragons. Finally, and perhaps more expected that it should be so, and sounding more like a UFO encounter, the participant said it ‘felt elemental: I looked out the window and saw two lights, one blue/white, one red/orange. At first, I thought I was just seeing lights from a plane crossing the sky, as it was a clear night, but then I realized that these lights were just staggering around, meandering, within the branches of the tree. ...I eventually went to sleep, but every night I saw these lights, and on the third night I was there, one of them got close to the window, and it seemed to look at me with orange eyes that were like fiery saucers.’ And he was not the only person to see them.<sup>78</sup> Some of the light encounters turn into fairies, so I have not included them here. It is enough for the participants that seeing lights equates to fairies, even if the explanation could be something else.

### **iii) Beautiful, human-sized, mostly female, regal**

The category of human sized fairies, possibly human in species as well, is documented in the later Middle Ages, in the stories of the Arthurian legends, supposedly recorded from the fifth century CE.<sup>79</sup> Morgan Le Fay is of course the most famous of the wise women to be found in King Arthur’s court, her name literally meaning ‘the fairy.’<sup>80</sup> According to Briggs, anyone with

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<sup>77</sup> S. Young, *Fairy Census*, vol.ii., op. cit., Ss526, pp.54-56

<sup>78</sup> *ibid.*, Ss603, pp.156-158

<sup>79</sup> K. Briggs, *Fairies in Tradition and Literature*, 1967, p.4

<sup>80</sup> *ibid.*, p.4

sensitive powers, usually young and beautiful women, ‘were called fays,’<sup>81</sup> and it appears clear that these fays are human, whether their powers are or not. There is some evidence of beautiful female elves in the 8<sup>th</sup> century, according to Hall, but much of the language is translated into nymphs and dryads, which are derivatives of Greek mythology.<sup>82</sup> However, it may be an interesting question to ask whether they are in fact being translated in this way because they are from the Greek mythos, or because the writers are equating their beings with the Greek ones, having had a classical education. Hall also finds the word for elvish beauty being used in old English as a description of a special kind of deceptive or seductive beauty, in particular regarding the description of Sarah, the wife of Abraham from Genesis, and also Judith from the apocryphal *Book of Judith*. Both examples describe a beauty which is not godlike and is being used for nefarious ends and so is called elvish.<sup>83</sup> In ecclesiastical writings on fairies, there are several stories of the courts of the fairy King and Queen, offered as visions and illusions to lure good Christians away from the faith. The remedy for dispelling such sights is usually holding up a piece of the Host, which causes the vision to disappear and the Christian to be restored to the faith.<sup>84</sup> Few of the modern encounters speak of the Fairy Queen, though some do. Houlbrook and Young have a sighting of her wearing ‘a green petticoat’, Bord has another of the ‘Queen of fairy, wearing white linen, [with a] fine looking King.’<sup>85</sup> The Fairy Census has a viewer ‘seeing small, pixie-like folk out the corner of my eye and parts of a twee, medieval-type world, as if this other world was overlapping reality’. They go on to identify ‘what I thought of as an ‘elf queen’ standing on the far bank.’<sup>86</sup> The scarcity of modern accounts that see the Fairy Queen is perhaps not surprising, as the likelihood of seeing the human Queen while out walking is equally rare. But sightings of these human sized fairies are unusual and is not clear why. Maybe

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<sup>81</sup> *ibid.*, p.4

<sup>82</sup> A. Hall, *op. cit.* p.92

<sup>83</sup> *ibid.* p.93

<sup>84</sup> R. F. Green, *op. cit.*, p.17

<sup>85</sup> J. Bord, *op. cit.* p.23

<sup>86</sup> S. Young, *Fairy Census*, vol.i., *op.cit.* Ss38, pp.61-63

they are not as well-known an area of folklore as the more common gnomes, small, winged fairies (or SWFs) and the like. The vast majority of all the accounts collected here speak of little creatures, the tallest around five feet, the smallest an inch. But a walker in Lancashire saw in amongst a group of birch trees, ‘a lady downhill from where we were. She wasn’t human, tall, thin, shining in a weird way, with dark hair and off-white long tunic.’<sup>87</sup> This fairy may not be little, but she does possess the fairy traits of luminosity and long flowing garments. She could, however, again because of her human size, have been a ghost, not a fairy, but the participant identifies her as a fairy ‘because she seemed very much connected to the birch trees.’ Another younger participant remembers being followed by what to her seemed to be ‘angels’ while spending summers with her grandparents as a child, ‘who would stop at a certain place and bid me goodbye, so I felt. I would see them from the car. They would race alongside it, appearing and disappearing again as we passed woods and houses.’<sup>88</sup> I include this example here because even though she identifies them as angels, she has recorded her experience in a fairy survey. Does she think they are angels because they are human adult size, not little? Had they been so, would she have called them fairies? There is a conflation in some areas of folklore, between angels and fairies, which I have addressed in my chapter on Fairy Spirituality. Another human sized fairy appears in a participant’s house one afternoon, ‘a female approximate age around twenty. Very tall. Totally pink skin but with blonde hair and translucent shiny pink wings. Threw pink glitter as she crossed the room which disappeared as it floated slowly to the floor. ‘Very tall. Maybe seven foot tall... She was beautiful but did not smile.’<sup>89</sup> Finally, this example is male, unusual in this category: ‘a tall, spear-carrying fairy man ... strong featured and with longish, messy, light brown hair. He wears a simple silver helm and silver vambraces on his forearms, the rest of his clothing is grey and pale blue, not modern in style.’<sup>90</sup> Again, this could

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<sup>87</sup> *ibid.* Ss70, p.87-88

<sup>88</sup> *Ibid.* Ss105, pp.127-128

<sup>89</sup> *ibid.* Ss136, p.159

<sup>90</sup> *ibid.* Ss129, pp.153-154

have also been a ghost, given its human qualities, but the participant identifies it as a fairy, mainly because they have seen 'small, tree spirit type fairies' as well.

#### iv) Little and ugly, mostly male

Fairies of the Early Modern period and beyond, up until the nineteenth century, were darker, smaller, and to be avoided. Disney and other, mainly children's writers may have given the fairies a more benevolent and even romantic air in recent times, but in the late Medieval and Early Modern period, people certainly did not regard them in that way. The commonest kind of fairy at this time are the Little People, perhaps also called gnomes, sprites, pixies, mannikins, dwarves or goblins. There are many regional variations too such as pucks, hobs, brownies and piskies. In the data, the commonest description is 'little man,' also 'creature' and 'figure.'<sup>91</sup> These are distinguishable from what Simon Young describes as SWFs. These fairy-like beings were often encountered alone, or in pairs. Folk tales at this time represent them as up to no good, certainly from the point of view of their human victims. Puck (also known as Robin Goodfellow) from *A Midsummer Night's Dream* is 'a shrewd and knavish sprite... that frights the maidens of the villagery.'<sup>92</sup> He originates from thirteenth century writings, where he is mentioned as Robin the Hob, though he may have been known in popular culture before then. Later, as Robin Goodfellow he is mentioned in a 1489 collection of letters, and he first appears on stage in a play by Anthony Munday called '*The Two Italian Gentlemen*'.<sup>93</sup> Rumpelstiltskin appears in *Grimm's Fairy Tales* in 1812, and Yallery Brown in 1891.<sup>94</sup> These fairy folk are often dressed in old fashioned, working clothes, with a conical hat and boots. They are also frequently described as having elderly features. These are by far the most commonly seen fairy-like beings, with the little be-winged Tinkerbells coming a close second. The vast majority of examples of this kind of fairy wear a hat with a pointed tip, though caps are sometimes

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<sup>91</sup> *ibid.* various accounts in vol. i and ii of *The Fairy Census*

<sup>92</sup> W. Shakespeare, *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, c.1596

<sup>93</sup> A. Munday, *The Two Italian Gentlemen*, 1584

<sup>94</sup> M. C. Balfour, (Sept. 1891). "Legends Of The Cars". *Folk-Lore* (Folklore Enterprises, Ltd.) Vol II, No III, pp264-271

mentioned. The commonest colour to describe either their clothes, or their skin, or both, is green, with brown and red next in line. Sometimes, they are labouring. One encounter talks of a small creature with pale, white skin and ‘gangly’ limbs. According to the observer, the ‘entity’ as described by the anonymous viewer, ran across his path as he walked back to his holiday cabin in a remote part of Scotland. He stopped and watched it run off into the distance. It cast a glance over its shoulder at the viewer, as it ran, making eye contact.<sup>95</sup> Other descriptions follow: little men help a farmer, though they are no bigger than ‘an ear of wheat’.<sup>96</sup> Another ‘gangly creature’ is seen, with ‘nut brown skin’, wearing no clothes.<sup>97</sup> A large amount of accounts talk in some detail about the kind of clothes the little people are wearing, which could also imply that the encounters are a little longer than some of those discussed earlier. Types of clothing include ‘doublet and knickerbockers’,<sup>98</sup> ‘a smock tied with a cord’,<sup>99</sup> ‘doublet and hose’,<sup>100</sup> ‘brown, leather jerkins’,<sup>101</sup> ‘black gowns with golden mesh’,<sup>102</sup> some rare females without wings, dressed in ‘bonnets and shawls’,<sup>103</sup> or some more little men ‘carrying small canes and dressed in brown cloaks’.<sup>104</sup> Clothing in folklore and in the modern accounts tends to be archaic. It is usual for fairies to be seen dressed in clothes of earlier centuries which adds to their strangeness, and otherworldliness. The little men are usually dressed in rustic clothing, nearly all of them wear hats or caps. Hats are usually pointed, though some are flat caps, typical in the North of England, and in one account, where a child saw a miniature hot air balloon filled with fairies, the males were wearing top hats.<sup>105</sup> In fact hats seem to crop up in these kinds of fairy sightings most often. When one considers the importance of hats in human civilisation,

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<sup>95</sup> Jo Hickey Hall, *The Modern Fairy Sightings Podcast*, ep.1, 2020

<sup>96</sup> Houlbrook and Young, *Magical Folk*, 2018, op. cit., p.

<sup>97</sup> *ibid*

<sup>98</sup> *ibid*

<sup>99</sup> *ibid*

<sup>100</sup> *ibid*

<sup>101</sup> *ibid*

<sup>102</sup> J. Bord, *Fairies, Real Encounters with Little People*, op. cit.

<sup>103</sup> *ibid*

<sup>104</sup> S. Young, *Fairy Census*, vol.i., op. cit., Ss1

<sup>105</sup> S. Young, *Fairy Census*, vol.i., op. cit., Ss80



since ancient times, humans have always worn head coverings. Hats have been used as social and religious indicators, as well as merely keeping your head warm. Head gear has often been controversial and continues to be. Hats can also be subversive and counter cultural. They were symbolic during the English Civil War for example, literally defining the major sides in the war, Cavaliers and Roundheads. Robert Kirk argues that the fairies adopt whatever clothing was worn by the humans that surrounded them. In his case, the dress of the lowlanders of Scotland.<sup>106</sup> Given that fairies pretty much emulate by tradition human behaviour, it is no surprise that they copy our clothing too. Simon Young notes three main rules that fairies in general seem to maintain, 'uniform not uniforms,' 'Harrods' and of course, 'go retro.'<sup>107</sup> There may be more logic to this, with this type of fairy resembling humans perhaps much more than the small, winged fairies, but it is also interesting that they maintain their anachronistic costumes at whatever remove of history. In Sir Orfeo, from the thirteenth century, the word even then used to describe their clothes is 'quaint.'<sup>108</sup> The Irish Leprechaun is most commonly depicted as wearing the clothes of a 'Regency Buck'<sup>109</sup> and this costume has stuck until the present day. Woodyard has found that it was common in the eighteenth and early nineteenth century for well-meaning people on the mainland of Great Britain shipping large quantities of Regency era clothing to Ireland. This clothing, though out of date was often well made and of costly fabrics, too good to throw away. So, this might explain why out of date clothing appeared in Victorian caricatures of leprechauns. However, Morgan Daimler does not agree that fairies should be regarded as 'a relic of the past, something to be found in dusty books and old stories.'<sup>110</sup> Daimler argues that fairies are able to be as modern as we are.<sup>111</sup> Our view of fairies, that ancient race of supernatural beings, connecting us to a long and barely remembered past,

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<sup>106</sup> R. Kirk, *The Secret Commonwealth of Elves, Fauns and Fairies*, 1691, op. cit.

<sup>107</sup> S. Young, *Fairy Fashions, The Three Rules*, from Beachcomber's Bizarre History Blog, 2022, accessed Feb 2025

<sup>108</sup> *ibid*

<sup>109</sup> C. Woodyard, S. Young, *Fairy Fashions and the Paranormal, Boggart and The Banshee Podcast*, 2022, ep.12

<sup>110</sup> M. Daimler, *Twenty first Century Fairy, the good folk in the new millennium*, 2023, p.15-16

<sup>111</sup> *Ibid.*,

is very similar perhaps to our view of indigenous peoples, or anyone with a link to our past, we are happy to see them weaving baskets or wearing ponchos but less enthusiastic about seeing them as computer programmers or surgeons.<sup>112</sup>

**v) Tiny, mostly female, with wings**

Since the Victorian era and the early twentieth century, fairies are described as mainly female, with wings, small, beautiful, white or pale skinned, luminous, dressed in diaphanous gowns, or even a tutu; there is an influence from classical ballet in the description of fairies. These creatures are some of the most popular kind of fairies either seen, or believed in, and the most beloved by children. Fairies of this description have populated the imagination thanks to the Cottingley fairies, the illustrations of Cicely Mary Barker, and Walt Disney amongst others. The earliest appearance of Disney fairies with wings is in *Fantasia* (1940), *Pinocchio* (1940), *Sleeping Beauty* (1940), and finally, *Peter Pan* (1953) where Tinkerbell finally achieves her archetype. The be-winged fairies have gone on to dominate the cultural depiction, and many modern-day encounters describe fairies in similar ways, including the encounters in the Fairy Census.<sup>113</sup> For example, two women in a suburban garden saw a small creature flying around, that on closer inspection appeared to have a human body and insect wings.<sup>114</sup> There are others with insect wings. Alexander Pope mentions them in the *Rape of the Lock*, 'Some to the sun their insect-wings unfold,/Waft on the breeze, or sink in clouds of gold;/ Transparent forms, too fine for mortal sight.'<sup>115</sup> Young believes this is the earliest mention of fairies with wings, in 1712.<sup>116</sup> As Young goes on to say, Pope's illustrator painted his fairies with butterfly wings, which are perhaps the most obvious choice, being colourful and pretty.<sup>117</sup> But there are also

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<sup>112</sup> Germond-Duret, C. (2016). Tradition and modernity: an obsolete dichotomy? Binary thinking, indigenous peoples and normalisation. *Third World Quarterly*, 37(9), 1537–1558.

<sup>113</sup> Simon Young, *The Fairy Census*, vol. i., 2017 op. cit.

<sup>114</sup> *Ibid.*, p.160

<sup>115</sup> A. Pope, *The Rape of the Lock*, 1712

<sup>116</sup> S. Young, When did fairies get wings? In *The Paranormal and Popular Culture, A Postmodern Religious Landscape* Edited by Darryl Catherine and John W. Morehead, 2019, p.253-274

<sup>117</sup> *Ibid.*

examples, as with the one above, of dragonfly wings, crane fly wings, and even bat's wings.<sup>118</sup> Most of the collected data are not specific, however, there are some other descriptions, such as, 'fluttery', 'circular shaped blur around them which I assumed were wings',<sup>119</sup> 'iridescent', 'one big wing on the back of its body',<sup>120</sup> 'fine wings like a daddy longlegs.'<sup>121</sup> There are also descriptions of the fairies floating or hovering, with or without actual physical wings. The idea of flight, especially with this kind of fairy, is still a recent idea. The idea of the floating fairy, or even the flying fairy may have to do with its nature as a spirit. This can be seen in Shakespeare, with Puck able to 'put a girdle around the earth in forty minutes',<sup>122</sup> or Ariel in *The Tempest*, 'All hail Master, Grave sir, Hail! I come on the curled cloud.'<sup>123</sup> The 'airy' nature of fairies insinuates their propensity to fly, rather than their actual nature as flying things. Young cites Paracelsus in this, in his definition of the creatures of air, or Sylphs, as Paracelsus defines them, and this description and definition seems to have dominated both fairy and neo-pagan traditions certainly since the eighteenth century.<sup>124</sup> And it is from Paracelsus that we get the divisions of earth elementals and air elementals (and also water and fire elementals).<sup>125</sup> Tame has an occurrence of 'the sound of beating wings'<sup>126</sup> and Bord speaks of 'light and shadowy, not solid bodies', 'light draperies, floating among the flowers,' and 'light and airy figures.'<sup>127</sup> All of these descriptions fit with this idea of the 'airy' nature of this particular type of fairy. Another aspect of this type of fairy, as we have seen with the little men, are the kinds of clothing that they wear. I have mentioned the anachronistic nature of the clothing of some fairies, and that this is a common fairy trope with this kind of fairy. For example, 'short petticoat dresses',<sup>128</sup> but unlike

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<sup>118</sup> *ibid*

<sup>119</sup> S. Young, *Fairy Census*, vol.i., Ss11, op. cit., p.38-39

<sup>120</sup> *ibid.*, Ss53, p.74-75

<sup>121</sup> *ibid.*, Ss115, p.137-139

<sup>122</sup> W. Shakespeare, *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, Act 2 sc. i, 1596, op. cit.

<sup>123</sup> W. Shakespeare, *The Tempest*, Act 1 sc. ii., 1611

<sup>124</sup> S. Young, *When did Fairies get wings?* op. cit. p.256

<sup>125</sup> *ibid*

<sup>126</sup> D. Tame, *Real Fairies*, 1999, op. cit., p.9

<sup>127</sup> J. Bord, *Fairies, Real Encounters with Little People*, op. cit., pp.28, 51 and 53

<sup>128</sup> Houlbrook and Young, *Magical Folk*, op. cit., p.81

the rustically dressed little men, the descriptions of these fairy clothes are much more generic, largely being described as dresses: ‘sparkling dresses,’<sup>129</sup> ‘light draperies,’<sup>130</sup> ‘rose petal draperies,’<sup>131</sup> ‘green dress,’<sup>132</sup> ‘pink dress,’<sup>133</sup> ‘beautiful, dressed in yellow,’<sup>134</sup> ‘black flowery dress,’<sup>135</sup> ‘sparkly lacy dresses’<sup>136</sup> ‘purple dress.’<sup>137</sup> And the vast majority of descriptions tend to focus on colours, rather than style or shape. The details of the clothes are not as important to the participants then, as the colours they emit. And this makes it difficult to understand whether the colours apply only to clothing, or to the colour of the fairies’ skin. Other descriptions that are pertinent to this kind of fairy, are ‘transparent,’ ‘sparkly,’ ‘golden aura,’ ‘glittery.’<sup>138</sup> But while it is expected to find these kinds of descriptions when encountering this type of fairy, they are less clear or detailed than those of the little men. It is as though the participants get an impression of the fairy and expect us to know the type. The participants mention colours, but not what is coloured exactly. Other words that are used in describing these fairies are traditionally associated with the feminine: ‘pearly looking beings’, ‘flowing and graceful’, ‘pale skin’, ‘not solid bodies’, ‘misty and leaflike’, ‘the most beautiful’, ‘very graceful’, ‘more ethereal’, ‘made of tiny, tiny stars’ ‘glowing’, ‘flitting’ ‘shimmering light around its feet’, ‘pretty’, ‘twinkly white light’, ‘tiny, little, delicate’, ‘kind little faces’, ‘spindly little bodies’, ‘the size of a child’s pinkie finger’, ‘beautiful, lithe, otherworldly’, ‘classic Tinkerbell’, ‘small and slim’.<sup>139</sup> Most of these descriptions fit in with the airy nature of fairies, which perhaps confirms Paracelsus’ imposition of elemental features upon supernatural creatures. The ‘earthy’ little men are much more robust and ‘grounded.’ I have left out the other two categories of

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<sup>129</sup> J. Bord op. cit. p.28

<sup>130</sup> *ibid.*, p.51

<sup>131</sup> *ibid.*, p. 53

<sup>132</sup> S. Young, *Fairy Census*, vol.i., op. cit., Ss14, p.41

<sup>133</sup> *ibid.* Ss17, pp.43-44

<sup>134</sup> *ibid.* Ss60, p.80

<sup>135</sup> *ibid.* Ss100, p.122-123

<sup>136</sup> *ibid.* Ss111, p.133-134

<sup>137</sup> *ibid.* Ss124, p. 147-149

<sup>138</sup> *The Fairy Census*, various accounts

<sup>139</sup> *ibid.*, various accounts

elementals, the water spirits or Undines, who have come to be associated with mermaids, though I and others are not sure if that is their specific evolution. Mermaids seem to have much more of a classical affiliation, being more chimera than fairy. Yet increasingly, mermaids and fairies are being spoken of as similar. There is only one account of an encounter with an explicitly identified water spirit, in both of the fairy censuses, and in the other data. They occur more in the spiritual, endogenous types of fairy, along with Unicorns as well, incidentally, and also they form part of the fairy types encountered by Geoffrey Hodson. And in his descriptions of the fairies, he experienced beside streams, rivers and waterfalls, they are much more similar to the airy be-winged fairies, than to the classical sea-dwelling mermaids. The only difference being that instead of wings, they have fish tails like mermaids, but they are also very small. I shall go into more detail about Hodson and his fairy like beings in chapters seven and eight.

### **Tree People**

I mentioned earlier that some people have written about encounters with ‘tree-like’ people, for want of a better word. Whether they are fairies or not is perhaps open to discussion, but the choice of the participants to include them in a fairy census does indicate a belief, on their part that these entities are related. Woodland has been a part of British ecology since the last ice age, over twelve thousand years ago, commonly known as the ‘wildwood’ which in later texts and in modern paganism, has taken on a magical connotation. Fairies have been associated with woodland, long before they were associated with the trees themselves, as tree spirits. The oldest idea of tree spirits comes from Antiquity and Greco-Roman traditions of dryads and hamadryads. I have written about the tree people in the fairy census before, including them in my study ‘because of the correlation of tree spirits to fairy beings in mythological and historical accounts. They are also of interest as standalone supernatural creatures.’<sup>140</sup>

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<sup>140</sup> M. Dickson, *Fairy Encounters in England in the Twenty-First Century*, FIS Newsletter, 2021, op. cit.

‘...As I was talking on the telephone I watched a ‘tree-man’ walk slowly down the road. ... The figure was approximately seven-foot tall, slim; I could clearly see a trunk like body from the waist up, branch-like arms and a quite haggard face with short branches coming from the top of the head and sides, but not like a true tree, they didn’t seem to taper to twigs. It walked in a measured way, as though putting one foot down and then making effort to pull forward, arms swinging. The figure was slightly leaning forwards.’<sup>141</sup>

‘A very large (twice human height) humanoid creature, which appeared to be made out of sticks, jumped out of a tree about thirty metres from me. He landed in a crouched position with one hand on the ground in front of him. He seemed to look at me for about five seconds, then jumped straight back up into the tree and sort of strode away, in the branches, along the line of the fence to the corner of the field, where he turned away from me and went out of sight.’<sup>142</sup>

‘... I spotted what looked like a tree rushing across fields towards us, and as it crossed the path before us into the next field, I could see there was a friendly, smiling face in the bark. ... It was about ten feet tall.’<sup>143</sup>

‘I saw an eerie light back amongst the trees. I crawled over to investigate, trying to be as quiet as possible, because I had no idea what could be causing it. What I saw was a creature like a person but stretched upwards, overly thin and tall, and with its head coming to a slightly corkscrewed point with some smaller branching points coming from it. It had its back to me and was a mottled brown but wreathed in a glowing greenish mist that came from it and seemed to be part of it. Part of it stretched up from the shoulders forming something vaguely wing or fan-like in shape.’<sup>144</sup>

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<sup>141</sup> S. Young, *Fairy Census*, vol.i., op. cit., Ss39, p.63-65

<sup>142</sup> *ibid.*, Ss54, p.75-76

<sup>143</sup> *ibid.*, iSs57, p.78-79

<sup>144</sup> *ibid.*, Ss97, p.120-121

The next two examples are perhaps more fairy-like but still seem to have more of a tree-spirit energy:

'I saw a tall, thin ethereal figure pressed with his back against a tree.' 'I felt the fairy was in its home woodland – it felt part of the place.' 'Tall, thin, green.'<sup>145</sup>

*'I was passing a very large oak tree which had recently lost a dead branch. It had split away and was almost as big as the tree trunk itself. Clinging to the tree trunk was a creature about the size of a man with a vaguely human face, webbed hands and feet, reptilian looking and with a damp frog-like skin of a blue tinge. It looked wary, startled and almost embarrassed that I had seen it. We communicated in a telepathic way. 'Shouldn't you be green?' I asked ... 'No, blue,' it replied. It looked, for all the world, like Gollum in the film version of Lord of The Rings.'*<sup>146</sup>

## **Fairies and the Colour Green**

Certainly, in Irish folklore, the colour green has frequently been associated with the supernatural, superstition, and fairies. Leprechauns, the most recognisable of Irish fairy-like beings, are most likely to wear the colour green. John Hutchings notes the contradictory nature of how the colour green is perceived in Ireland: on the one hand it is the mascot of the nation, The Emerald Isle, contained in the flag, in the uniform of sports teams, for example, yet at the same time, it is 'not to be worn' for reasons of bad luck.<sup>147</sup> Hutchings has uncovered many examples of supernatural lore attributed to the colour green, many of which relate to fairies: '[t]hey are associated with green through their habit of dancing in green fairy circles, from the belief that their graveyards never brown, and because in many areas they are reported to wear green.'<sup>148</sup> He goes on to cite the account of Anne Jeffries, 'a nineteen-year-old, was sitting in the garden when "there came over the hedge, of a sudden, six persons of small stature all clothed

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<sup>145</sup> S. Young, *Fairy Census*, vol.i., op. cit., Ss86, p.102

<sup>146</sup> *ibid.*, Ss116, p.139-141

<sup>147</sup> J. Hutchings, *Folklore and Symbolism of Green*, in *Folklore* 108, 1997, 55-63

<sup>148</sup> *ibid*

in green, which frightened her so much as to throw her into a great sickness.’<sup>149</sup> Hilderic Friend writing in 1884 recounts that ‘the fairies claimed green as their colour and were consequently deeply grieved if proper attention was not paid to their claims, and invariably resented an injury done them.’<sup>150</sup> Green is the colour we most closely associate with nature, and fairies are often also associated with nature. Tam Lin collected the ‘mantles of green’ of the local maidens, Janet, his love and saviour ‘ties her kirtle green a bit above her knee.’<sup>151</sup> However, while green is mentioned in the data of fairy encounters, and is the most noted colour, it is not the most dominant. Most people do not notice the colours at all, apart from in the category of ‘little men,’ but even then, often it is the style of dress that is noted, and the colour of their hats. Green, brown and red predominate. Amongst the small, winged fairies, it is not the commonest colour. However, green is common in popular folklore stories: *The green children of Woolpit*, *the green lady of Caerphilly*, the Green Man. It is perhaps notable that while green has many folkloric connotations, it is not the most seen or recorded in fairy encounters, at least not anymore.

## Fairy Mood

Large numbers of participants in both fairy censuses do not record the mood they thought the fairy was in. The expectation of course is that fairies will be mischievous, according to folklore, though by now it will have become clear that these modern encounters at least, do not seem to follow folkloric expectations. The largest group are considered ‘friendly,’ and the next biggest shows no fairy mood reported. The next largest group, though only a small percentage, are described as ‘joyful,’ followed by ‘mischievous.’ So, as far as the Fairy Census is concerned, fairies and fairy-like beings are largely positive in outlook, with an almost equal number of moods not reported, either because there was no mood to report, maybe due to the length of the encounter, the nature of the being, or just that it was not important for the witness. Only

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<sup>149</sup> *ibid*

<sup>150</sup> H. Friend, *Flowers and Flower Lore*, 1884, p.318

<sup>151</sup> Fairport Convention, Tamlin, from the album *Liege and Lief*, 1969



four encounters from both volumes of the Fairy Census, were described as either, ‘malevolent, terrible, threatening, or unwelcoming.’ In ten encounters, the being was described as ‘angry,’ sometimes at the witness, one because the witness had urinated on the being,<sup>152</sup> another because the participant had dumped damp carpet in the entity’s territory.<sup>153</sup> Fourteen of the encounters were designated as ‘impartial’ or ‘aloof.’ Three accounts state that the being was surprised by the encounter, three beings appeared frightened or worried, three were described as busy, and four as ‘curious.’ As expected, there was a number of encounters where fairies, as per folklore, were considered to be ‘mischievous,’ but certainly not in a threatening way. Though the threatening examples are quite upsetting, they are definitely in the minority. It might have been expected that most fairy encounters would be neutral, but that also does not seem to be the case, with the largest group appearing as ‘friendly.’ This may also imply a kind of interaction with the human participant, on an instinctive level. ‘Joyful’ does not imply this, but the observation of the ‘joy’ in the behaviour of the entities would imply at least the lack of a threat. It could also imply an unawareness on the part of the entity that anyone was witnessing their presence.

### **Gradual transformation from/to fairy**

Some of the encounters have participants who saw a natural feature of the landscape and then watched as it morphed into a fairy or fairy like being. Others have transformations where they saw the fairy like being, then blinked and it became a tree stump, or disappeared. Others have seen lights that transformed into fairies on closer inspection. This experience perhaps tells us something about the way that the witness may have perceived the entity, and at the same time, it does indicate the gradual nature of some of the encounters. In Theosophy, some of the practitioners talk of energy building up, a concentration of fairy energy that manifests then as a

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<sup>152</sup> S. Young, *Fairy Census*, vol.i., op. cit., Ss49, p.70-71

<sup>153</sup> S. Young, *Fairy Census*, vol. ii, op. cit., Ss536, p.63-64

physical being. It is unclear and perhaps debateable, because this discourse was so relied upon by the Cottingley fairy writers. It would seem that they were surprised that a fairy entity could build up enough energy to be photographed (and as it turned out, they could not!), and always an implication that fairies could only be seen by the clairvoyant. Fairy folklore once again gives us examples of fairies being shape shifters, and some of the encounters that testify to a transformation from either a mundane object to a fairy being, or vice versa, certainly give that impression. The entity itself, however, may not be changing at all, and perception is very much in the eye of the beholder. It could also be a mechanism by which the fairy can protect itself if it feels threatened by the human. Though what a human could possibly do to harm a fairy is unclear. John Kruse has coined the term, ‘nymphocide’ for episodes in folklore where humans have murdered fairies, either accidentally or deliberately.<sup>154</sup> Kruse maintains that fairies may have longer lifespans than humans, they are not immortal, in the sense that they can be killed. There are references in folklore to fairy funerals (William Blake most famously says he saw one), and to fairy cemeteries.<sup>155</sup> Fairies can be killed by the ringing of church bells, Boggarts can be ‘laid to rest’ by a clergyman, ‘on the Hebridean island of Benbecula a mermaid was accidentally slain by a stone thrown at her head during an attempt by some fishermen to capture her.’<sup>156</sup> In *Lady Isabel and the Elf-knight*, an eighteenth century ballad probably derived from a Dutch ballad of the thirteenth century, ‘the heroine lulls to sleep the fairy who plans to kill her and then stabs him to death; in another version she drowns him- but the ability to kill is the point.’<sup>157</sup> J. F. Campbell relays a story concerning the killing of a *gruagach* (a Scottish Brownie) with a sword.<sup>158</sup> The Reverend Robert Kirk also mentions a man with second sight who, during a visit to faerie, “cut the Bodie of one of those People in two with his Iron Weapon.”<sup>159</sup> Of

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<sup>154</sup> J. Kruse, *British Fairies, Killing Fairies – the unpleasant truth*, 2018, [britishfairies.wordpress.com/2018/09/02/killing-fairies-the-unpleasant-truth](http://britishfairies.wordpress.com/2018/09/02/killing-fairies-the-unpleasant-truth), accessed July 2024

<sup>155</sup> Ibid.

<sup>156</sup> Ibid.

<sup>157</sup> Ibid.

<sup>158</sup> *Popular tales of the West Highlands*, vol. i, p.7

<sup>159</sup> J. Kruse, *Killing Fairies*, op.cit.

course, none of the modern encounters descend into violence on either side. In fact, we seem to have moved away from traditional folkloric rules of behaviour and engagement with fairies, to one where the encounter can only be a friendly, positive one, or a sight of the joy of a being dancing or flying.

## **Fairy Gender**

In the previous chapter, I have noted the gender of the viewers, which for the most part follow the binary designations of male or female. Females outnumbered males 2:1 as participators in a fairy encounter, and I have discussed why this might be the case. But what gender of fairy do they see, and what does this tell us about the being? I have divided my own fairy taxonomy into five distinct categories, two of which are predominantly male or predominantly female. But what is most noteworthy is that the majority of the encounters do not specify the gender of the fairy. The participants tend to go by type and traits, so a researcher will interpret whether the fairy or fairy like being is male or female even if the witness account does not give a gender. Perhaps what is more interesting is whether the genders of the fairies correspond with the genders of the human participants. Do males see little men, do females see little winged women? The type of supernatural beings, clothes, colours, behaviours, size, etc., all contribute to connoting what humans consider to be masculine or feminine traits. Modern ideas of masculinity and femininity may be changing, but there is still a large amount of misogyny and homophobia associated with social notions of masculinity and femininity. Being interested in folklore could be seen as a feminine area of research, and fairy belief may also bring attendant prejudices about males especially, believing in such creatures. In terms of which gender of human sees which gender of fairy, there were one hundred and forty-seven females and seventy males from both Fairy Census, vol. i and vol. ii.. Out of all the sightings, fifty-one were identified as male entities, thirty-seven as female and the rest had no designation. Twenty-five did not have a human form, and eighteen were a mixed gender group of two or more beings. Of

the female witnesses, twenty-five saw female entities, thirty-one saw male entities and fifty-six gave no gender, sixteen were non-humanoid, and twelve were a mixed group, while of the male witnesses, nineteen saw male entities, twelve saw female entities, and twenty-three gave no gender, nine were non-humanoid, and six were a mixed group. So overall, the largest group of sightings, of either male or female witnesses either did not state a gender or did not perceive a gender. Some of those accounts did use the generic term 'fairy' which has come to mean, more often than not, a 'small, winged female' though rather than take that for granted, I did look for at least one other corroborating piece of evidence, like a dress, or a feminine description, like 'pretty.' Even allowing for that, the next biggest group seen by both genders is male. It is very clear that male witnesses see more males than females, and closer but still evident that female witnesses see more females than males. Twenty-eight percent of male witnesses saw same gender fairies, and seventeen percent saw the opposite gender, while seventeen percent of female witnesses saw same gender fairies, but twenty-one percent saw the opposite gender. The small popularity of male entities over female entities could be explained by the more explicit nature of the 'ugly little men' category, where it is clear that the entity is male. I am sure that if I had just taken the designation 'fairy' for granted, with no other corroborating evidence, the number seeing 'fairies' and by implication, female, would have been greater. But it would be inaccurate to assume one group and take for granted the other. On the whole, what people are seeing are entities that they are reluctant to genderise, or the gender is not important, it is the genre.

I have attempted to present a range of beings that can be described as fairies or fairy like beings, according to the accounts given and also supported by folklore, folktales and historical documents. There are commonalities between these diverse categories: size is important, and these creatures are mostly smaller than humans (with a few exceptions). They have human like features, faces, hair, limbs, body, but they are distorted in some way. Some appear not to be

solid in composition. They also wear human clothes: conical hats especially are the most common, as are the diaphanous gowns worn by the female fairies. The magic wand, which is ubiquitous in twentieth century illustrations and cartoons, is rarely mentioned in the accounts. But some fairies are found with implements. They have some supernatural powers; the ability to fly in the case of the be-winged fairies, or to move through the air somehow, without such appendages. They can make themselves invisible when sighted, and they are good at keeping themselves hidden. Light is also commonly mentioned. Although I have set apart a category of sightings that only include lights, there are accounts given in the other categories of light playing a part in the physical manifestation of a fairy, sometimes as an aura, or being given off their skin, or by some aspect of their clothing. Overall, there is enough similarity of appearance in these categories to classify these sightings as typical of accepted (by the viewers, folklorists, historians, etc.,) fairy culture, in the British and European tradition. These encounters go a long way to enlightening us on what fairies are like, and what their effect is and how they are affected by changing culture helping us to create an understanding of what fairies are.





## Part Three



## Chapter Five

### Nostalgia and Fairy Belief

In th' olde dayes of the Kyng Arthour,  
Of which that Britons speken greet honour,  
    Al was this land fulfild of fayerye.  
    The elf-queene, with hir joly compaignye,  
Daunced ful ofte in many a grene mede.  
    This was the olde opinion, as I rede;  
    I speke of manye hundred yeres ago.  
But now kan no man se none elves mo.

Geoffrey Chaucer<sup>1</sup>

I will arise and go now, for always night and day  
I hear lake water lapping with low sounds by the shore.  
While I stand on the roadway, or on the pavements grey,  
I hear it in the deep heart's core.

W.B Yeats<sup>2</sup>

Fings ain't what they used to be.

Lionel Bart<sup>3</sup>

In this chapter, I will first present some of the discussions about the negative and positive aspects of nostalgia in representing the past. This is to give context to what is quite a wide-ranging topic, with implications for psychology, politics, science, social science, humanities, all of the social structures that operate within a historical timeline. But most importantly for this thesis, to understand how nostalgia is one of the important cultural influences of fairy belief. To that end, I will be focusing on two important sub-categories of nostalgia, the yearning for a bygone era, and the remembrance of a golden childhood, which are the most salient lines of inquiry into the role fairy belief plays in the construction of these nostalgic narratives.

If the present is unsatisfactory then we can always look to the past, where things were simpler and sunnier. In the eighteenth century, nostalgia was considered a disease of homesickness,

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<sup>1</sup> G. Chaucer, The Wife of Bath's Tale, The Canterbury Tales, 1387 - 1400

<sup>2</sup> W. B. Yeats, The Lake Isle of Innisfree, 1888

<sup>3</sup> L. Bart, Oliver! 1968

with physical medical symptoms, curable by ‘opium, leeches and a journey to the Swiss Alps’<sup>4</sup> and in the nineteenth century, it became a negative indicator of ‘social...malaise.’<sup>5</sup> For a very long time, and in other languages, nostalgia has meant “longing for home” until the twentieth century when sociologist Fred Davis first posited the idea that nostalgia had less to do with homesickness than a longing for the way things were, which made way for the more modern and common idea of today, that nostalgia is a longing for a lost, though possibly imagined past.<sup>6</sup> Lowenthal observes that nostalgia has been depicted as a harmless, frivolous, even ‘jokey’ idea, but, over the last forty years it has been regarded more negatively, though still as rather unimportant.<sup>7</sup> But it is increasing in interest in academic circles, with a definitive study of nostalgia by medical historian Dr. Agnes Arnold-Forster.<sup>8</sup> Anything from even twenty years in the past could be fodder for the nostalgia definition. ‘History is recycled as nostalgia almost as soon as it happened.’<sup>9</sup> But rather than the fault of nostalgia, Lowenthal maintains that this view of the past created by nostalgia is now seen as embarrassing at best, and dangerous at worst.<sup>10</sup> Arnold-Foster also calls nostalgia a ‘dangerous emotion,’ though she does not start off painting nostalgia in a negative light, in fact, she finds herself surprised in the act of presenting a ‘defence of nostalgia.’<sup>11</sup> Indeed she goes further than other authors to date in exploring the psychological nature of nostalgia, which in recent years has been subject to more research, particularly in its essence as an emotion, and what that means.<sup>12</sup>

Nandor Fodor, renowned psychologist and friend of Freud in his declining years, took a strong interest in nostalgia while investigating the more extreme examples of paranormal activity.<sup>13</sup> He believed that supernatural encounters were ‘embodiments of emotional disorders.’ He

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<sup>4</sup> S. Boym, *The Future of Nostalgia*, Basic Books, 2000, p.xiv

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, p.xiv

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.* p. xiii

<sup>7</sup> D. Lowenthal, *Nostalgia tells it like it wasn't*, in *The Imagined Past*, 1989, p.19

<sup>8</sup> A. Arnold-Foster, *Nostalgia, A history of a dangerous emotion*, Picador 2024

<sup>9</sup> D. Lowenthal, *op. cit.*, 19-20

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, p.21

<sup>11</sup> A. Arnold-Foster, *op. cit.*, 1-15

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, p.86-105

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, p.95 -96

believed they 'were responses to abrupt changes in lifestyle or place... when left untreated, too much nostalgia could develop into a monomaniacal, compulsive mental state.' The decades in between and immediately after the twentieth century World Wars, saw an increase in spiritualism, paranormal activity, and was, in general 'a time of deep collective despair mixed with cautious optimism.' Fodor was interested in efforts at this time to construct utopias in the face of terrible, global cataclysm. He saw and strongly criticised the cultural moves towards utopianism, and also its connection with nostalgia, that Fodor saw as 'foolish' and 'futile.'<sup>14</sup> Utopians were trying to create new worlds, and nostalgia was trying to change existing worlds, but both were after places of perfection, 'where people could retreat from the uncomfortable reality of their day-to-day lives.' Ever the Freudian, Fodor believed that the desires expressed by utopianism and nostalgia had their roots in the desire to return to the womb.<sup>15</sup> But his research and writing highlight the psychological struggle for people, especially young people, to cope with violent and catastrophic change, like living through world wars and pandemics, manifesting in paranormal encounters. If a teenaged girl in the Isle of Man can manifest her psychological state of mind via a talking mongoose,<sup>16</sup> and two girls in Yorkshire by photographing the fairies they maintained till their dying day that they had seen frequently,<sup>17</sup> or a group of pre-pubescent children in 1970s Nottingham can be terrified by hundreds of car driving gnomes in the park,<sup>18</sup> one can perhaps give credence to the power of the mind, and also the power of nostalgia, the danger of nostalgia as Fodor would have it, in bringing these kinds of experiences and encounters to light. However, while these famous events are all interesting examples, coming after global trauma, they are possibly only one kind of reaction. Many people, equally affected by these events have not necessarily turned to the supernatural, or

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<sup>14</sup> Ibid., p.98

<sup>15</sup> Ibid., p.100

<sup>16</sup> N. Fodor, H. Carrington, *Haunted People: The Story of the Poltergeist down the Centuries*, 1951, Kessinger Publications, 2006, p.213

<sup>17</sup> J. Cooper, *The Case of the Cottingley Fairies*, op. cit., p.10-14

<sup>18</sup> S. Young, *The Wollaton Gnomes*, Pwca Books, 2023, p.3-10

even common or garden religion in order to cope with it. It could just be a case of *post hoc ergo propter hoc*. However, the fact that these events have occurred, even to a small proportion of the population, is interesting in terms of the cultural work that supernatural activities and experiences are doing as one aspect of nostalgic reimagining of the past. While there are implications for psychology and medicine, supernatural events also shine a light on our capacity for belief, and ask an important question, why, for some people, it is the supernatural that provides a mechanism for answers when trying to make sense of widespread and often catastrophic change. This was the inspiration for some of Fodor's investigations. And while it may be just a form of refusal to face up to an honest evaluation of the past, a form of denial, a 'retreat' into nostalgia, a bit like alcoholism, or drug addiction, often more common reactions to trauma, rather than an appraisal of how to understand the past so that the future can be better. However, belief in and experience of the supernatural, as a reaction to trauma is of interest. Nostalgia may be a psychological crutch, but it also opens up our minds to creativity and imagination that could steer us towards a better imagined future.

Twenty years earlier than Arnold-Forster, Svetlana Boym, while advocating for a 'reflective nostalgia', saw the yearning for a home that never was and a past that never happened as intrinsically limiting.<sup>19</sup> She goes on to describe nostalgia not as 'longing for a place, but actually it is a yearning for a different time... [it] is rebellion against the modern idea of time, the time of history and progress. The nostalgic desires to obliterate history and turn it into private or collective mythology, to revisit time, like space, refusing to surrender to the irreversibility of time that plagues the human condition.'<sup>20</sup> And she warns that 'the danger of nostalgia is that it tends to confuse the actual home and the imaginary one. In extreme cases it can create a phantom homeland, for the sake of which one is ready to die or to kill. Un-reflected nostalgia

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<sup>19</sup> S. Boym, *The Future of Nostalgia*, op. cit., p.xiii

<sup>20</sup> Ibid., p.xv

breeds monsters.<sup>21</sup> There is a strong example of that in Trump's 'Make America Great Again' movement. In the UK, Brexit followed in these ideological footsteps. And the death of Queen Elizabeth II in 2022, who had been the only monarch the vast majority of the UK population could remember, let forth a gargantuan flood of sycophantic nostalgia for, unbelievably, Empire, Monarchy and elitism, all this while working class people were starving, freezing and failing to make ends meet in low paid jobs, in one of the strongest and most powerful economies in the world.<sup>22</sup> There are perhaps too many other examples of Boym's phantom homelands giving impetus to monstrous governments: Putin's attempt to reunify Ukraine into a fabled Russia that no longer exists, though perhaps equalled by Israeli nationalism which at its most extreme seems to be carrying out its ethnic cleansing of Palestinians from Gaza and the West Bank. Of course, these nostalgic reasons for land grabs, genocide and power are really only excuses, but the conjuring of nostalgic pasts for political presents are demonstrably powerful, at least if polls, social media posts and the despotic events themselves, are to be believed. Not only does un-reflected nostalgia create these monstrous political demagogues, those demagogues know what they offer is phantom, but they continue to cynically manipulate their populations into buying it. Boym's own recollections of a Soviet past, she admits, made her sentimental while living exiled in the US, and on her return after the opening of the borders, until she realised that what she had romanticised and idealised in exile was dirty, shoddy and hateful in reality.<sup>23</sup>

But is nostalgia truly incompatible with the desire for a more veracious cultural view of the past? Stuart Tannock says not, and that, on the contrary, it is 'a valuable way of approaching the past, important to all social groups.'<sup>24</sup> He shows that nostalgia relies on the 'construction of a prelapsarian world, but also on the continuity asserted, and the discontinuity posited,

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<sup>21</sup> Ibid., p.xvi

<sup>22</sup> I. McRae, How much will the Queen's funeral cost? Big Issue, 2022

<sup>23</sup> S. Boym, op cit., p.41

<sup>24</sup> S. Tannock, Nostalgia Critique, Cultural Studies 9(3), 1995, p.453-464

between a prelapsarian past and postlapsarian present.<sup>25</sup> In order for us to better understand how nostalgia then functions and its importance, the 'critique needs to move towards an examination of nostalgia as a general structure of feeling, through questions of continuity and discontinuity.'<sup>26</sup> At first, Tannock seems to agree that this construct serves to negatively propagate a 'past as a stable source of value and meaning,'<sup>27</sup> in the face of an unpalatable present, and that any forward motion in terms of progress in that particular present is 'blocked or threatened and that is so because of a separation from an imaginatively remembered past, homeland, family or community.'<sup>28</sup> For Tannock, nostalgia as a negative or positive force in society depends on 'the extent to which the nostalgic text is taken to be prescriptive of an historical future [which gives hope], as opposed to being descriptive of an historical past [which causes grief].'<sup>29</sup> He illustrates this with a quote from Raymond Williams who says that nostalgia encourages 'withdrawal from any full response to an existing society. Value is in the past as a general retrospective condition and is in the present only as a particular and private sensibility.'<sup>30</sup> But Tannock disagrees and goes onto assert that while Williams seems to offer an explanation of nostalgia as a retreat, Tannock sees it as also a retrieval.<sup>31</sup> When we use nostalgia to find these 'resources', then we can 'retrieve the past for support in building the future.'<sup>32</sup> as Fred Davis says in *Yearning for Yesteryear*, nostalgia functions in modern society as an 'outlet' or 'safety valve,'<sup>33</sup> and Tannock agrees, saying that nostalgia can help people adapt to present social change by providing 'soothing and utopian images of the past.'<sup>34</sup> However, the danger, Tannock believes is that if the discontinuity or the 'cut', is placed between the pre- and post- lapsarian worlds, then there is a danger of 'legitimizing all that went before' and that 'the

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<sup>25</sup> Ibid., p.461

<sup>26</sup> Ibid., p.461

<sup>27</sup> Ibid., p.456

<sup>28</sup> Ibid., p.456

<sup>29</sup> Ibid., p.460

<sup>30</sup> R. Williams, *The country and the city*, 1973, Vintage Classics, 2016, p.140

<sup>31</sup> Tannock 1995, p.458

<sup>32</sup> Ibid., p.459

<sup>33</sup> Davis, *Yearning for Yesterday*, A Sociology of Nostalgia, The Free Press, 1979, p.456

<sup>34</sup> Tannock, op. cit., p.459

nostalgic structure of Golden Age and Fall contains the implicit assumption that decline to the present is caused by forces external to a previously stable and utopian system; the nostalgic subject author after all returns to the past to find sources of identity and community, not sources of alienation and oppression. Decline naturally must come after from elsewhere, from the cut or catastrophe.<sup>35</sup> It cannot be untrue to state that there never was a single idyllic state, but that it is constructed via hindsight and maintained via nostalgia. And even if there were a period when human society was getting it right, it would soon change, as change and progress march inexorably on. And equally, progress does not mean that it gets better, it may be faster, more efficient, but it can only really be different. For every gain in one area there will be a deficit in another. We are not always better off universally. It is then important to recognise that ‘the nostalgic structure of feeling may thus mystify or displace the extent to which decline... is caused by pressures and forces internal to the past utopian world itself,’<sup>36</sup> and that ‘nostalgia should unquestionably be challenged and critiqued for the distortions, misunderstandings and limitations it may place on effective historical interpretation and action.’<sup>37</sup> But, Tannock wishes to end on a favourable note, concluding that ‘nostalgia should equally be recognised as a valid way of constructing and approaching the past, recognised that is, as a general structure of feeling, present in and important to individuals and communities of all social groups.’<sup>38</sup>

### **Fairies and Nostalgia**

Nostalgia transforms the dirty and shoddy historical landscape into a purified, sanitised and romanticised version of itself. It is a glamour. Fairies popularly use glamour to transform themselves and their surroundings in many tales of fairy interactions with humans.<sup>39</sup> But while they can transform, they have also been transformed. Fairies are peculiar in how they are used

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<sup>35</sup> Tannock, op cit., p.456

<sup>36</sup> Ibid., p.461

<sup>37</sup> Ibid., p.461

<sup>38</sup> Ibid., p.461

<sup>39</sup> J. Kruse, ‘All was delusion, nought was truth,’ [www.britishfairies.wordpress.com](http://www.britishfairies.wordpress.com), 2022, accessed 06/09/2023

for cultural construction of nostalgia, and they differ from other supernatural entities used to create the feelings of loss of a halcyon past or golden childhood. Fairies do not have an affiliation, whether religious, political or national, they do not have a creator or author, though they are frequently adopted into texts and stories, they have always been around. Like energy, fairies seemingly are neither created nor destroyed but can be transformed from one thing into another. Indeed, the fairies of the Victorian and Edwardian period have been reduced in size and in stature, relegated to the nursery where they glitter and gleam, with tiaras, wands and diaphanous dresses, and, above all, wings. It is ironic that the Victorian fascination with the abnormalities bestowed upon humans through birth defects, illness, and other conditions, could not stomach the darker elements of fairy nature, and so transformed them into these tiny, shiny, feminised nursery decorations. These fairies perhaps have their place next to the guardian angels and the residents of Toad Hall or the Hundred Acre Wood, as just another set of characters from children's stories. But these fairies are not the same ones feared and propitiated throughout history. These fairies are tricksters, kidnappers, baby stealers, incubi and succubae.

Fairies figure prominently in both yearning for a bygone era (often bucolic and pastoral), and the construction of a golden childhood. They play an important role in our yearning for these, and that role is powerful, at least as far as believers may be concerned. In some ways fairies epitomise these ideas, but they can also subvert them. I want to demonstrate how fairy belief is important to the construction of nostalgic narratives and how they can operate as 'retreat or retrieval' in terms of dealing with the past and looking forward to the future. The yearning for a bygone era is more general, and supports both right wing, white British domination of views of the past with a pro-military, monarchist, Church of England and hierarchical social class slant, but also, a liberal/left leaning but still mostly white view of the heroic peasants' revolts, non-conformist religious movements and working-class protests and revolutions. While proponents of the two poles of these ways of thinking might vehemently disagree, they have several



attitudes in common that rely on nostalgic readings of the past, in terms of political, social and religious themes. The creation of a golden childhood, however, is both general to the majority of the population, in that we have all experienced childhood, and are encouraged by our culture to regard it as a separate idyllic state, but also intensely personal and subjective. While we may construct remembrances of a childhood idyll, whether true or embellished or even reinvented due to actual trauma, each one will be specific in what is recalled as a perfect, golden childhood experience. Both sub-categories sit rather uncomfortably as an appropriate way of viewing the past, so it will be interesting to look at how Tannock's idea of retreat or retrieval, or indeed both, work in these instances.

### **Fairies and the Yearning for a Bygone Era**

The British past is one of monarchism, empire and world domination, but it is also one of the pastoral, with magical woods filled with elves and fairies, and a pre-Christian past that has survived to today, through stone circles, barrows and other ancient ruins. There are certain dualisms in the role fairies play in the nostalgic construction of a bygone era: for example, a preference for the rural (which is also the common habitat of the fairies) over the urban, and a rejection of the modern in favour of the retro (in terms of home furnishings, fashion, the desire for learning ancient crafts, for example). Fairies are quintessentially retro. By this, I mean cultural styles that either come from or imitate styles from the past. They are inevitably imagined in medieval, early modern or eighteenth century dress<sup>40</sup> and they are most often represented, in art and literature, but also in folklore, as belonging to the countryside, to rusticity. The countryside itself still holds some fascination and even fear in the minds of those who do not frequent it regularly.<sup>41</sup> Fairies provide a magical 'otherworld' of the countryside, where things are not what they seem. On the face of it, they provide imaginative escapism in this respect: there is narrative from fairy tales, folk songs and folklore accounts that people can

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<sup>40</sup> Woodyard and Young, Boggart and Banshee Podcast, 2022, ep. 12, series 1, op. cit.

<sup>41</sup> J. Little, *Nature, Fear and Rurality in Fear: Critical Geopolitics and Everyday life*, Routledge, 2008, p.87

indulge in round the fireside before returning to the real world of work, family and society. It is no coincidence that it was the Romantic writers and artists who revived and repurposed the fairy legends of the British Isles. But they were also tapping into the chivalric tradition of the medieval period that tells of knights, ladies, wizards and most importantly, the fairy women, who were by no means hidden woodland creatures living out of sight, but powerful courtiers, aides to the court whose magic supported the power of the famous kings and knights. Sir Walter Scott's tales embellish and bring to life the glamour of the early medieval court: and later, so do Tennyson and the Pre-Raphaelites, injecting rich colour and linguistic dexterity into the stories of King Arthur, Ivanhoe and the rest. But Spenser anticipates all of these, in 1591, with his poem *The Faerie Queene*. Fairies then as now have been a metaphor for an enchantment that people feel has been 'lost' whatever epoch they were born in. Shakespeare, for example, in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*<sup>42</sup> seems to be recreating a bucolic idyll from a bygone, classical era, with his fairies in the wood in ancient Athens, an escape for the four upper class lovers, suffering from such threats to their happiness as banishment, execution, forced marriage, and unrequited love.<sup>43</sup> They are divested of their Athenian clothes, beguiled and bewildered by Puck (incidentally a very English fairy, well known in the Midlands where Shakespeare was from<sup>44</sup>), who, in carrying out Oberon's righteous revenge for the treatment of Helena by Demetrius, to make Demetrius fall in love with her, accidentally thwarts the two true lovers, Lysander and Hermia, which Oberon is not best pleased about. The driver of the main plot is farcical misunderstanding, it is a comedy after all, but at the centre of it is the truth that only the fairies can bring to light, that 'the course of true love'<sup>45</sup> is the abiding theme and that all the action must be driven towards the maintenance of it. Even the sub-plot reflects this, with

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<sup>42</sup> W. Shakespeare, *A Midsummer Night's Dream* op. cit.

<sup>43</sup> Taken by the Fairies: Fairy Practices and the Production of Popular Culture in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*  
 Author(s): Mary Ellen Lamb Source: *Shakespeare Quarterly*, Autumn, 2000, Vol. 51, No. 3 (Autumn, 2000), pp. 277-312  
 Published by: Oxford University Press

<sup>44</sup> P. Jones, Pucks and Lights, in *Magical Folk*, C. Houlbrook and S. Young eds., 2018, op. cit., p.31

<sup>45</sup> W. Shakespeare, *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, op. cit.

Titania and Oberon's quarrels affecting the natural world, causing floods and other natural disasters, and that only when the king and queen of the fairies are restored to each other, shall the world also be restored to order.<sup>46</sup> However, Shakespeare, writing and performing *A Midsummer Night's Dream* at the same time as Spenser's poem *The Faerie Queene*, keeps very distant from any potential comparison with the Elizabethan regime. His play is set in ancient and mythical Athens, in the time of Theseus. There is a Queen *and* a King of the fairies, and Titania at least is depicted more as a Goddess than a fairy, 'a votaress of my order.'<sup>47</sup> And his story has very little to do with the cult of chivalry, nor any reference to King Arthur. Whether by design, or just because he was more interested in creating a farcical comedy and an apologia for the theatre, his use of fairy is very different from that of Spenser's.

Matthew Woodcock notes that Spenser's contemporaries were very interested in the use of fairy as allegory in the poem, but that many modern critics just ignore it.<sup>48</sup> He seeks to 'reassert the centrality of fairy to Spenser's mythopoetic project and demonstrate how the poet is engaged in presenting not simply an uncomplicated unequivocal portrait of Elizabeth but a more self-conscious commentary on the whole process of using fairy to represent and celebrate the Queen.'<sup>49</sup> The purpose of the poem, in the tradition of Early Modern poetics is to decode the allegory, but Woodcock does not want to detract from the consideration of 'the element of fairy mythology... in its own right.'<sup>50</sup> His investigation wants to reveal what Spenser was doing using fairy belief as the main allegory and why many modern critics overlook it. Woodcock's treatise gives a helpful insight into historical understanding of fairy belief at the time of Elizabeth, particularly the belief of the existence of a separate fairyland and the links between this magical land and the Arthurian story of healing and return.<sup>51</sup> Spenser makes a

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<sup>46</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>47</sup> *ibid.*, act 2 scene 2

<sup>48</sup> M. Woodcock, *Fairy in the Faerie Queene*, Ashgate 2004

<sup>49</sup> *Ibid.* p.2

<sup>50</sup> *Ibid.* p.2

<sup>51</sup> *Ibid.* P.3

connection between fairy and the Tudor line as a restoration of the 'old British line', so 'Elizabeth is glorified as an individual through identification with the fairy queen and her lineage is glorified through her associations with Arthur'.<sup>52</sup> Fairyland and fairies are ultimately shown as an idealistic concept, and a counterpoint to the burgeoning witchcraft persecution to come. And though largely a homage to Queen Elizabeth, the poem is also a fairy myth of a bygone era of knights and damsels, in the same vein, though slightly anticipating Shakespeare in chronology.<sup>53</sup> The poem is of course an allegory, and a sycophantic one at that, yet it uses in a positive way, the tropes, myths and legends of fairy that less than fifty years later, would become demonic and the cause of the deaths of many people in the so-called 'witch-craze'.<sup>54</sup> Fairy belief, like all supernatural belief was strong in the Early Modern period, we know this, sadly from witch trial confessions, but also from art and literature. Spenser chooses to represent the Queen of England as a supernatural creature, a superhuman entity possessed of magical powers, and the events take place in fairyland, a place where reality is suspended. And the basis to the Arthurian legend was always magical; Merlin, the wizard manipulates events to bring together Arthur's parents, Morgan le Fay, Arthur's sister is a skilled magical worker and is called 'Fay' or fairy because of her magical skills, as was the traditional view of fairies in the Medieval period. Arthur's regalia, including the magical sword Excalibur come to him via another powerful 'Fay' in the form of the Lady of the Lake. And of course, the nostalgic narrative created here, uses one of the most powerful and well known of English mythology, the story of King Arthur, representing England's first Protestant female monarch, constructing her, not as a pious, Virgin Mary figure, but as the Queen of the Fairies, a powerful and magical figure, ruler in her own right.<sup>55</sup> Even Chaucer, two hundred years earlier, bemoans, via the Wife of Bath, of the

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<sup>52</sup> Ibid. P.3

<sup>53</sup> E. Spenser, *The Fairie Queene*, 1590

<sup>54</sup> N. Ben-Yehuda, *The European Witch Craze of the 14th to 17th Centuries: A Sociologist's Perspective*. *American Journal of Sociology*, 86(1), 1–31, 1980

<sup>55</sup> E. Spenser, *The Faerie Queene*, 1596, op. cit.

disappearance of the fairies from our shores, and how we are the worse for it.<sup>56</sup> Fairies provide a link to nature and the pastoral, often being compared to or called nature spirits, elementals or tree spirits. In recent years, people are becoming more concerned about climate change, loss of habitats, food production, pollution and the general future of the planet, and for some, fairy belief and fairy veneration have both educated and provided an outlet for these concerns. Andy Letcher writes that ‘identification with the fairies is an extremely common motif in the creative expressions of protestors.’<sup>57</sup> These protests were partially successful in reducing the scope and cost of the government’s plans.<sup>58</sup> Letcher thinks it is not surprising, or even original that fairies came to symbolise these and other eco-protest movements, and credits this to the protestors’ success. Eco-paganism and eco-spirituality continue to gain traction within and beside climate protests and awareness, ‘a perfect example of a vernacular religion’<sup>59</sup> that goes beyond face paint and fairy wings at protest demonstrations, for some translating into literal belief.<sup>60</sup> Letcher observes an identification with fairies by the eco-protestors, ‘three key features resulting from this choice of identity: that protestors see themselves as “little people” standing up to the power of the state; that protestors position themselves as outside of and opposed to mainstream society; and that the adoption of fairy mythology helps to justify their counter-cultural morality.’<sup>61</sup> He concludes that, ‘fairies have inspired the Western imagination for at least a thousand years... as... hidden places of the world become ever rarer through human encroachment, it seems fitting that a new interpretation of fairies should be emerging: proud, unpredictable, tricky, and yet deeply moral, eco-friendly and ... powerful. These are the qualities that protesters attribute to fairies and therefore to themselves.’<sup>62</sup> While fairy belief is

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<sup>56</sup> G. Chaucer, *The Wife of Bath’s Prologue and Tale*, 1380s, op. cit.

<sup>57</sup> Letcher, A. (2001). *The Scouring of the Shire: Fairies, Trolls and Pixies in Eco-Protest Culture*. *Folklore*, 112(2), 147–161.

<sup>58</sup> *Ibid.*, p.147

<sup>59</sup> *Ibid.*, p.148

<sup>60</sup> *Ibid.*, p.147

<sup>61</sup> *Ibid.*, p.148

<sup>62</sup> *Ibid.*, p.159

by no means the only mechanism towards eco-protest, they seem to provide plenty of symbolism for those determined to draw attention to and even attempt to reverse some of the policies destined to worsen our current climate challenges.

Neo-paganism, where fairy belief also resides, though not exclusively, has long been the champion of the formation and propagations of matriarchal communities and viewpoints. These constructs are spurred on by the reconstructionist impetus of largely historically unfounded matriarchal societies and practices of pre-Christian times.<sup>63</sup> Fairy belief is easily co-opted into these constructs, as fairies tend to be in some iterations, mostly female (see previous chapter) and led by a fairy Queen. While some may question the ethics of a reconstructionism based on sketchy historical and archaeological evidence, new age witchcraft and fairy 'pathways' have provided and continue to provide empowering safe spaces for women to express themselves more freely than in male dominated arenas, they also tend to be more sympathetic and accepting towards LGBT people and more open towards those questioning their sexuality and gender orientation.<sup>64</sup>

### **Fairies and the creation of a Golden Childhood**

Fairies, for many, have a formative role in the creation of an idyllic childhood, a childhood that is magical, otherworldly, personal and comforting, rendering special the human participants in fairy encounters. For these lucky ones, and also for those who have not experienced fairies, but who had a strong belief in them and spent childhood hours thinking of them and searching for them, the memories can come back in adult life as reminiscences of golden moments in an otherwise boring, loving, or even traumatic childhood time. The fairies associated with childhood art and literature are usually the prettiest, most sparkly and magical. Some are wise and helpful like the fairy godmother in *Cinderella* or the blue fairy in *Pinocchio*, some are

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<sup>63</sup> C. Eller, *The Myth of Matriarchal Prehistory: Why an Invented Past Won't Give Women a Future*, Boston: Beacon Press, 2000, p.10

<sup>64</sup> L. Orion, *Never Again the Burning Times*, Waveland Pressing, 1995, p.234-235

mischievous but never really dangerous, or if so, they are thwarted in the end, like Rumpelstiltskin, some are mean, like Tinkerbell, who goes on to sacrifice herself to save Peter Pan's life. But these are the fairy *tales* which serve a different purpose, usually a moral one, so that a child is encouraged in good behaviour. Folkloric fairies kidnap children, steal their mothers and some are never seen or heard from again.<sup>65</sup> Since the early Victorian period, fairies were beginning to lose their fearsome and macabre nature (although not exclusively by any means), by which they were characterised in the medieval and early modern period. Once stripped of their mischievous and murderous propensities, they became more palatable to children, often being depicted and described as children themselves, as Purkiss illustrates with the child actors and actresses who worked long hours in theatres up and down the country playing the roles of fairies, trussed and often burned by the fairy lights incorporated into their fairy costumes,<sup>66</sup> or in the paintings of Cicely Mary Barker's flower fairies. Childhood is popularly reconstructed as a golden age of innocence, and in the Victorian period, fairies were becoming more aligned with the specifically small, beautiful, female, be-winged and wand carrying creatures that go on to be popular in art, literature and music for the rest of the century and beyond. In some households, the fairy replaces the angel or star that goes on top of the Christmas tree. Early photographs of the period show girls and young women dressed in traditional fairy costume, with a floaty dress, wings and a wand, sometimes barefoot, sometimes with ballet shoes, and sometimes a tiara. This image of the fairy is only about one hundred and seventy years old but prevails now as the most recognised aspect of the fairy, dominating to the present day.

Joe Moran 'explores some of the meanings and functions of childhood nostalgia in contemporary culture.'<sup>67</sup> He tends to agree with the critique of nostalgia as either a passive

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<sup>65</sup> J. Kruse, *The Pied Piper of Elflame: fairy abductions of children*, 2020, BritishFairies.wordpress.com, accessed July 2024

<sup>66</sup> D. Purkiss, *Troublesome Things*, op. cit., p.227

<sup>67</sup> J. Moran, *Childhood and nostalgia in contemporary culture*, in *European Journal of Cultural Studies*, London: Sage Publications, 2002, Vol. 5(2) 155-175

retreat from modern day pressures, or at worst, the encouragement of extremist views of a political and social utopia where political correctness amongst other ‘woke’ agendas, does not exist. Moran believes that ‘nostalgia for childhood [in particular] manifests itself not only in these consolatory narrative forms, but also in the more nebulous practices of everyday life in ways that both feed into and challenge the dominant meanings ascribed to childhood in contemporary culture.’<sup>68</sup> He goes on to elaborate that ‘the significance of childhood nostalgia lies in the fact that in its different forms, it is situated at the intersection of a number of contesting discourses on childhood.’<sup>69</sup> He goes on then to outline these discourses as: ‘photographs, tourist sites, toys, books, clothes and other consumer products.’<sup>70</sup> Each of these discourses has connections with fairies and the commodification of fairy belief, which is a prevalent occurrence now more than ever. For Moran, the location of childhood in a ‘separate space’ and children themselves ‘as an alien species’ is territory ripe for exploitation by nostalgic narratives.<sup>71</sup> Childhood becomes a genre and can be used as a resource for the nostalgia industries. Fairies play a huge role in the marketisation of childhood nostalgia, in its appeal to adults, and also to parents. Fairies have appeared in children’s literature of course, for centuries, but in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries, the available fairy themed books, toys, costumes, films, TV shows and computer games demonstrate the fairies’ huge popularity. From birth to adolescence (the natural boundaries to childhood perhaps), there is a fairy for that. The fairy theme may not be the dominant genre of nursery (Moran notes the use of the word “nursery” for child’s bedroom, an antiquated descriptor for the area where the children of the rich and aristocratic were kept, and repurposed in modern times in the houses of the less well to do<sup>72</sup>) decoration, it has to compete with the talking animals of course, but its magical woodland setting, its unicorns and rainbows, its delicate fairy creatures, bright

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<sup>68</sup> Ibid., p.160

<sup>69</sup> Ibid., p.170

<sup>70</sup> Ibid., p.171

<sup>71</sup> Ibid., p.156

<sup>72</sup> Ibid., p.157



red toadstools and tiny fairy houses, the fairy theme both creates the idyllic childhood environment and is created by an imagining of it based on nostalgic reminiscences of childhoods past. But the nursery decorations are not for the baby, at least, not yet. It is for the parents who are buying into this constructed childhood sphere but also recreating or reconstructing their own childhoods in nostalgia mode.<sup>73</sup> Once a toddler, the child will probably draw all over the sylvan wallpaper, and paint itself in glitter, and make itself sick on fairy cakes. It is the adults who create the fairy lands in their child's spaces, for themselves, as much as or even more than for their children.

### **Fairies and Childhood Encounters**

Seeing or experiencing the fairies is usually a singular activity. It sets the child apart from the adults, in a way much childhood nostalgia is viewed as. As Moran argues, it is 'a separate space outside of adult manipulation and control.'<sup>74</sup> It also sets them apart from other children, and it can make them a figure of ridicule too, or even of suspicion. C.S. Lewis does this to Lucy in *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe*, where her older brothers and sister do not at first believe her story of a magical place at the back of an old wardrobe, and he also banishes from Narnia, first Peter and Susan after *Prince Caspian*, then Edmund and even Lucy at the end of *The Voyage of the Dawn Treader*, observing the trope of their being too old for fantasy as the children approach puberty. Sexual maturation then, is seen by some to be the threshold for the end of childhood, and an end to participation in magical realms, see also Wendy (who is forced to leave Neverland and grow up) and of course Peter Pan who refuses to.<sup>75</sup>

Some of the encounters documented by Simon Young in the *Fairy Census* and elsewhere, are reminiscences of childhood experiences with fairies that are not repeated in adulthood. It would seem obvious then, that remembrances of magical encounters in

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<sup>73</sup> Ibid., p.168

<sup>74</sup> Ibid., p.165

<sup>75</sup> J. M. Barrie, *Peter Pan and Wendy*, 1903

childhood would appeal to adults, especially if that life is mundane and full of adult concerns. Bettelheim comprehensively details the importance of fairy tales (though not always containing actual fairies) in the lives of children, in their psychological development,<sup>76</sup> so how much more will a real encounter influence a child's development and affect them for the rest of their lives? *The Fairy Census* cites over thirty encounters which took place in England when the participants were under ten years old. Perhaps unsurprisingly, the majority take place either inside the child's home, or in their garden, with a parent or other present who did not experience the encounter with the child. There are however two instances where the caregivers see the fairy first and introduce it or draw attention to it to the child: 'I was helping my granddad with his gardening around a small pond that he had in his garden... I distinctly remember a small, slightly darkly coloured creature coming out of the rush. It had a sort of limp and only one big wing on the back of its body, which was black. All I remember is my Grandad picking me up and putting me on his lap and pointing at it, saying that it was a fairy and they lived in his garden. I said hello to it, but it didn't reply, it was hiding behind the rush plants. It then picked up a small pebble and walked off.'<sup>77</sup> 'My mother pointed out a fairy flying above a stream outside a National Trust-type property we were visiting. It glowed brightly, and clearly had wings, arms and legs. The recent Rossendale exhibition of fairy photos made me realise this was almost certainly an insect lit up by the sun. But I still choose to believe it was a fairy ...It was too small, too alive and too human.'<sup>78</sup>

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<sup>76</sup> B. Bettelheim, *The Uses of Enchantment*, Penguin, 1975, p.4-8

<sup>77</sup> S. Young, *The Fairy Census*, 2017: §53, p.74-75) England (Hampshire). Female; 1980s; 0-10; on or near water, in a garden; with one other person who shared my experience; 12 pm-3 pm; two to ten minutes; friendly, joyful; never or almost never has supernatural experiences; you were undertaking a repetitive task (e.g. picking blackberries); profound silence before the experience, a sense that the experience was a display put on specially for you, unusually vivid memories of the experience, a sense that the experience marked a turning point in your life, a sudden chill before the experience.

<sup>78</sup> Ibid: '§98, p.121 England (Northeast). Female; 1990s; 0-10; on or near water, in open land (fields etc), in a garden; with one other person who shared my experience; 12 pm-3 pm; less than a minute; 'beautiful', 'wondrous'; no special state reported; never or almost never has supernatural experiences; unusually vivid memories of the experience, a sense that the experience marked a turning point in your life, a sudden chill before the experience.

Some of the children are unaccompanied, or with friends their own age. At least three of the examples here, occurred more than once: 'Whilst in bed as a child I was awoken on several occasions over several years, to see what I described then as little nasty wolves coming out of an antique wood wardrobe, after drawing them for my mother, which I remember very clearly I can now say they looked more like fairies.'<sup>79</sup> 'I slept in a cot in my mother and father's bedroom when I was a small child. I used to see the Green Man in the opposite corner of the room; he stood between the wall and my mother and father's wardrobe. I felt the Green Man was there, of his own free will, to look after me.'<sup>80</sup> 'In my bedroom was a wooden play box which I was very afraid of. The reason for this was I would often hear voices coming from inside the box and these voices belonged to very tiny men – a bit like gnomes – who would come and go from the box. I still don't like the box – it is now a blanket box and in my dad's house.'<sup>81</sup>

The encounters fall almost equally between the traditional winged fairy, and the little, usually male wingless gnomes, although there is some variety between them. There is one striking example of two children from West Yorkshire seeing 'a group of what I would call Shetland Ponies, but they were all very strange colours (red, green, lilac etc etc), they appeared to be eating some kind of cabbage like plants. They were peaceful and did not look at us. They were on a small island in the middle of the stream.'<sup>82</sup>

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<sup>79</sup> Ibid: §37, p.60-61, England (Devon). Female; 1990s; 0-10; inside a private house; with several other people, none of whom shared my experience; 12 am-3 am; one to two minutes; angry; regular supernatural experiences; you had just woken up or were just about to go to sleep; hair prickling or tingling before or during the experience, unusually vivid memories of the experience, a sudden chill before the experience.

<sup>80</sup> Ibid: '§66, p.84, England (Kent). Male; 0-10;1950s; inside a private house; on my own; 6 pm-9 pm; less than a minute; friendly; occasional supernatural experiences; you had just woken up or were just about to go to sleep; a sense that the experience was a display put on specially for you.

<sup>81</sup> Ibid: '§94, p.113-114 England (Northeast). Female; 1970s; 0-10; inside a private house; on my own; I can't remember; 'a number of times over a period of weeks but cannot remember how long for'; mischievous; occasional supernatural experiences; you had just woken up or were just about to go to sleep; a sense that the experience was a display put on specially for you.

<sup>82</sup> Ibid: §134, p.157-158, England (Yorkshire). Female; 1970s; 0-10; on or near water; with one other person who shared my experience; 12 pm-3 pm; two to ten minutes; joyful; never or almost never has supernatural experiences; no special state reported; unusually vivid memories of the experience, a sense that the experience marked a turning point in your life.

## The Cottingley Fairy Photographs and the Wollaton Gnomes

Cottingley crops up everywhere in this thesis, but perhaps nostalgia is the most influential role that the story plays culturally, causing its impact, but also acting as a warning. The children responsible for the photographs became a centre for a maelstrom of fairy hysteria, led very irresponsibly by some of the most prominent names in British Theosophy, culminating in nothing short of cultural fraud, and indeed actual fraud, when the truth was revealed in the 1980s, that the fairies in the pictures were cardboard cutouts created by Elsie Wright, a talented and imaginative artist, copied from a picture book.<sup>83</sup>

The Wollaton Gnomes case nicely bookends almost a century of the child generated fairy belief that began in Cottingley. It was reported nationally in 1979, when six children aged ten and under, shared an experience where they saw a group of gnomes in little cars driving around a park in Nottingham.<sup>84</sup> To many people who grew up in the twentieth century, the description of the creatures is reminiscent of the picture books by Enid Blyton, about her characters Noddy and Big Ears. Noddy drives a little yellow car, wears a blue hat with a spherical bell on the end of it. Big Ears is more of a traditional garden gnome type, with pointy ears, and a white beard.<sup>85</sup> The gnomes appeared to the children pouring out of the ‘swamp’ in the grounds of Wollaton Hall, a 400-year-old house, redolent with folklore. “...we heard a noise in the forest then these men came out about half the size of me, and they had long white beards with red at the bottom and they had little white and red cars and they were chasing us, and they nearly caught Patrick [one of the other witnesses] and Patrick fell in the swamp headfirst, and they kept chasing us and they didn’t talk. They was [sic] laughing. They was friendly. They was joyful.”<sup>86</sup> Three of the children were interviewed by their Headmaster two days later, and their accounts are similar. Within a few days the *Nottingham Post* published the story, then later in the year, Marjorie

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<sup>83</sup> J. Cooper: *The Case of the Cottingley Fairies*, 2006, op. cit., p.175-176

<sup>84</sup> B. Swancer, [The Mysterious Gnomes of Wollaton Park \(mysteriousuniverse.org\)](http://mysteriousuniverse.org), 2018, accessed July 2024

<sup>85</sup> E. Blyton, *Noddy in Toyland*, et al, 1953

<sup>86</sup> S. Young ed., *The Wollaton Gnomes*, 2022, op. cit., interview with Angela, p.17-23

Johnson of the Fairy Investigation Society, who was also local and also a medium, got in touch and later recorded the story in her book, *Seeing Fairies* (2014), and finally the national press also got involved.

While Cottingley had its ‘big reveal’ in 1986, before the two participants died, Wollaton as yet is still up for questioning. Despite many efforts by journalists, fairy investigators and the like, none, not one of the children involved has come forward to corroborate or deny the sightings. But there are some strong similarities between the accounts of Wollaton, now recorded in Simon Young’s recent book on the topic, and the Cottingley case. The most significant thing is the questioning of the children by their headmaster, Robin Aldridge. This is particularly telling, both in the fact of his position in the eyes of the children, an authority figure with power, and also his mode of questioning, using leading questions, requiring yes and no answers and putting ideas into the children’s mouths:

RA: You’re not in any doubt of what you saw?

Witness: Pardon?

RA: You’ve no doubts at all that what you saw was little men in cars?

Witness: (very softly) No.<sup>87</sup>

Just as Elsie and Frances from Cottingley were confronted by several influential men (who desperately wanted to believe them for their own agendas) and therefore must have felt intimidated into keeping to their story, so too, these Nottingham children could perhaps have felt they would get into trouble for causing a fuss and making up a lie. In both of the cases, the parents are dismissive; Elsie Wright’s father maintained throughout that he did not believe the Cottingley photographs were real, though it is Elsie’s mother who sends the pictures to the

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<sup>87</sup> Ibid., p.18

Theosophy society.<sup>88</sup> The parents of the Nottingham children are also dismissive.<sup>89</sup> This disbelief on the part of parents to pre-pubescent children would be more likely to spur on their claims than cause them to deny them. Once the press, both local and national got involved, as in the case of the Cottingley children, it must have been impossible for the children to back down.

However, real or imagined, both the Cottingley fairies and the Wollaton gnomes illustrate the power that fairies have over childhood imagination and belief. Regardless of the veracity, these children wanted to believe and be believed. In both cases, they frequent a natural place with folkloric associations, armed with their own knowledge and beliefs, and open themselves up to the otherworld. If two Edwardian girls with a photographer relative who clearly sparked their interest in photography<sup>90</sup> saw fairies in their wood, it seems quite natural they would want to capture the fairies on film. On becoming disappointed in being unable to photograph them, it seems possible that Elsie might suggest she draw them then photograph them as though they were the real fairies.<sup>91</sup> Similarly, the Nottingham children went at night when it was dark to a four hundred-year-old building and park about which they had heard stories of gnomes and fairies, they definitely experienced something, so real to them, that they ran away genuinely scared.<sup>92</sup> This might not be so surprising, given that it is what children tend to do in play, create fear deliberately, only then to scare themselves. However, to go from creating a sinister and ghostly atmosphere to being chased out of that place by car driving gnomes is either a strong psychological manifestation, or a supernatural manifestation beyond many that have been recorded.

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<sup>88</sup> J. Cooper, *The Case of the Cottingley Fairies*, op. cit., p.34

<sup>89</sup> S. Young, *The Wollaton Gnomes*, op. cit., p.23

<sup>90</sup> J. Cooper, op. cit., p.27-28

<sup>91</sup> *Ibid.*, p.190

<sup>92</sup> S. Young op.cit., p.7

There are also some fairy sightings shortly before and after Wollaton, in and around the same area: 'I lived in Wollaton as a youngster, a short distance from the park, and saw [a gnome] in our back garden when I was about six years old in 1972. We had a big garden and to this day I would swear it walked from one side of the garden to the other.'<sup>93</sup> 'I was bought up in Wollaton... in the late seventies... One evening in summer... I looked across the other side of the canal and directly opposite us was a small shiny white humanoid creature about eighteen inches high you couldn't see its face because it was too bright and shiny glowing white like a light bulb but shaped like a small person, I just felt it was looking at us and standing still. ... the creature then bolted into a small, wooded area then out onto the big field we chased it, but it bolted too fast, so we just stood there and watched it get further across the field until it disappeared out of sight.'<sup>94</sup>

It is perhaps more difficult to see how nostalgia, in its creation of a golden childhood, can be anything other than a retreat from the present, bringing pleasant memories perhaps, but also regret for the loss of that time, illuminated not just by long hot summers and snowy Christmases, but also these delicate, otherworldly creatures. Both the Cottingley and Wollaton cases highlight less of a sense of wonder and delight, more an abhorrence for the exploitation, whether intentional or not, of the childish imagination or experience of fairies. Indeed, both of these cases serve to illustrate how nostalgia fuels the narrative of the innocent and segregated sphere of childhood and how it is infiltrated and corrupted by the entrance into that sphere of the adults, who in their turn are desperate to capture an experience of childhood that they have lost and want to recapture.<sup>95</sup>

The biggest conflicts affecting the world at the moment are those between Russia and Ukraine and Israel and well, most of the Middle East. But all of these narratives point to a real or

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<sup>93</sup> S. Young, *The Fairy Census*, op. cit. §102C England (Nottinghamshire), p.124

<sup>94</sup> Ibid: §104C) England (Nottinghamshire), p.125-127

<sup>95</sup> J. Moran, op. cit., p.155-175

imagined loss in the past, some centuries old, some more recent, that the leaders of these nations want to restore to the people. They are powerful narratives, and nostalgia is the vehicle being used to carry everyone home. But what of the adversaries? Using the same nostalgic narratives and words like freedom, independence, occupation, are loaded with drama and political triggers. Unsurprisingly, both sides in these conflicts are using the same themes in favour of their arguments for violence, terrorism and warfare. Nostalgia is two sides of the same coin, which is what makes it so dangerous perhaps. In comparison with these global issues, fairies seem unimportant, yet fairy belief and cultural ideas about fairies have endured for centuries, sometimes being co-opted into the larger narratives. It would be true enough to say perhaps, that fairies are one of many cultural and indeed spiritual and religious aspects of nostalgia as well as other things. Fairies are much more than decorative in the creation of nostalgic narratives. Current narratives about the supernatural emphasise the subversive, and fairies in some of their iterations are certainly that. They are secretive, elusive, mischievous, threatening, magical, menacing, beautiful, musical, graceful, devious. They add an extra dimension to whatever they are attached to. Perhaps they do contribute to the idealised view of the past, as the Wife of Bath describes it, lamenting the loss of the dances of the Elf Queen ‘and all hir joly compaignye.’<sup>96</sup> And the reason for their disappearance?

For now, the grete charitee and prayeres  
 Of lymytours and othere hooly freres,  
 That serchen every lond and every streem,  
 As thikke as motes in the sonne-beem,  
 Blessynge halles, chambres, kichenes, boures,  
 Citees, burghes, castels, hye toures,  
 Thropes, bernies, shipnes, dayeryes,  
 This maketh that ther been no fayeryes.  
 For ther as wont to walken was an elf,  
 Ther walketh now the lymytour hymself  
 In undermeles and in morwenynges,  
 And seyth his matyns and his hooly thynges  
 As he gooth in his lymytacioun.  
 Wommen may go saufly up and down.  
 In every bussh or under every tree  
 Ther is noon oother incubus but he,  
 And he ne wol doon hem but dishonour.<sup>97</sup>

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<sup>96</sup> G. Chaucer, op. cit.

<sup>97</sup> Ibid.



It is very clear how the Wife feels about the elves' replacement with clergy, and her indictment that 'ther is noon oother incubus but he' is telling. In the fourteenth century, were people nostalgic for a pre-Christian era, for when blessings 'as thike as motes in the sonne-beem' did not cover every space in the country? And the reputation of clergy lurking 'in every bussh or under every tree' with the implication that they do so to importune women is bold to say the least, when it is clear from the Wife's testimony whom she would prefer to be importuned by. She would not have recognised the Early Modern Fairies, yet they fulfil her thesis, changed from 'joly' dancers to evil demons by the same clergy she decries. But this extract is a representation of the distance nostalgia gives us from the idealised past. These yearnings are jam yesterday but never jam today. In this case, the disappearance of fairies in favour of an establishment religious magic is a critique of contemporary society. Here nostalgia is acting as a temperature gauge for culture. And who better to represent the medieval mood than a matronly ex- it girl, multiple times married, the only kind of medieval woman with a smidgeon of power, not subject to male relatives or husbands, a widow, an heiress, a businesswoman. Not someone with whom a member of the clergy really knows what to do.

In the end, it is expedient to go with Stuart Tannock and see the value of nostalgia as well as the dangers highlighted by the other academics. In the twenty-first century, fairy belief is for a minority at least, encouraging better attitudes towards contentious modern dilemmas: climate change, gender equality, LGBT rights for example. By retreating into the imagined past of fairy, and retrieving the ideals of respecting nature, difference and individuality, perhaps some aspects of nostalgia can be good for our present culture. However, nostalgia requires control and context. Currently, the men (and it is men) with their fingers on the red buttons of destruction seem to be in control of the nostalgia narratives. We need more fairy culture to wrest that control away from them.







## Chapter Six

### Fairies and Enchantment

It had much of glamour might;  
Could make a ladye seem a knight;  
The cobwebs on a dungeon wall  
Seem tapestry in lordly hall;  
A nutshell seem a gilded barge,  
A sheeling seem a palace large,  
And youth seem age, and age seem youth:  
All was delusion, nought was truth.

Sir Walter Scott<sup>1</sup>

Some are bold enough to predict that 'Britain in 2030 will be a secular society'. I do not hesitate to contradict such predictions. Occulture, alternative spiritualities and 'soft religion' will increase in significance in the West. That this is so will become more evident as the 21<sup>st</sup> century progresses.

Christopher Partridge<sup>2</sup>

Any sufficiently advanced technology is indistinguishable from magic.

Arthur C Clarke<sup>3</sup>

Enchantment is understood as, 'the state of being under a spell.' To understand the power of enchantment is to take a step into the study of the human psyche and in order to better understand the social and cultural nature of enchantment, we probably have to accept the reality of the world that most of us agree is 'out there', in order to have some common ground upon which to examine what enchantment is, and what role fairies play in it. Nostalgia is just one of the ways in which fairies can enchant us. So, it is important to look at the nature of enchantment, what it means, and how it is utilised by the fairies who continue to use it in their relationship with humans. A relationship that has endured for much of recorded time.

Nostalgia, as discussed in the previous chapter, is a cultural concept that is a substantial example of how enchantment works. For good or for ill, nostalgia is huge in its influence upon culture. And part of the way in which nostalgia can create its influence is through enchantment.

Hartmann and Brunk have looked at the link between nostalgia and marketing, and they argue

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<sup>1</sup> W. Scott, *The Lay of the Last Minstrel*, 1805

<sup>2</sup> C. Partridge, *The Re-enchantment of the west*, Vol. I 2004, Concluding Comments

<sup>3</sup> A. C. Clarke, *Profiles of the Future*, 1962

that 'nostalgia marketing permeates and upholds to a large part the entertainment, film, music, tourism and cultural heritage industries but also technology, food, and fashion sectors—for example, reuniting bands from the past like Guns N' Roses, the comeback of vinyl, retro-sounding music by chart-storming pop artists like Adele and Sam Smith, revamped NOKIA phones and Hydrox cookies, or nostalgia-framed series like *Vikings*, *Mad Men*, and *Stranger Things*.'<sup>4</sup> Clearly, their focus is economical, but in order to appeal to their consumers, they know that retro sells. But it is not enough just to be retro, there has to be the element of enchantment, that transforms the product or service, from just a 'blast from the past' to an engaging, and enchanting way of convincing people to part with their hard-earned money. For Hautmann and Brunk, enchantment is 'the creation of specialness,' which goes beyond the niche of marketing products of a bygone era.<sup>5</sup> And clearly, from their point of view, nostalgia, in tandem with enchantment becomes a very powerful mechanism for marketing strategies. Of course, researchers into the significance and influence of fairy belief, will want to go further than the capitalist mechanism of the USP. But in a way, it is enchantment that is the USP of fairy encounters and beliefs.

Charles Taylor, writing in the early 2000s about secularisation and enchantment, puts forward the argument that secularisation does not necessarily mean the 'turning away from' magic (*entzauberung*), but the opening up of a different kind of enchantment that does not rely on the pre-modern beliefs of mainstream religions, superstition and folklore. He states that in the pre-modern world

people lived in an enchanted world. This is perhaps not the best expression; it seems to evoke light and fairies. But I am invoking its negation, Weber's expression 'disenchantment' as a description of our modern condition. The enchanted world in this sense is the world of spirits, demons, and moral forces which our ancestors lived in.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Hartmann, Benjamin & Brunk, Katja. (2019). *Nostalgia marketing and (re-)enchantment*. International Journal of Research in Marketing, pp669-686

<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

<sup>6</sup> C. Taylor, *A Secular Age*, Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2007, p.25 - 60

Taylor understands the relationship between the enchanted world and the self as 'porous' in that these forces of enchantment were part of a person's inner world.<sup>7</sup> The status of this perception of the world, according to Taylor, is then counteracted by disenchantment,<sup>8</sup> and he talks about the 'buffered' self of the post-Enlightenment which gives the possibility

of taking a distance from, disengaging from everything outside the mind. My ultimate purposes are those which arise within me, the crucial meanings of things are those defined in my responses to them.<sup>9</sup>

Finally, in the modern age, Taylor recognises the return to enchantment, with people searching out 'fullness' and 'new moral reflections' which 'open a window' without any actual return to a pre-modern mindset.<sup>10</sup> For Taylor, some examples of modern re-enchantment are found in modern art, literature, nature, secular spirituality, social relationships with others, and idealism.<sup>11</sup>

So, whilst Taylor explains disenchantment and re-enchantment as separated historical processes, Jason Josephson-Storm, of whom, more later, rejects Taylor's characterisation of enchantment and specifically disenchantment and re-enchantment; people didn't 'return to enchantment' because they never left it, they just began to find it in different places. Josephson-Storm argues that, notwithstanding the Enlightenment and the advance of Modernism, belief in magic and magical beings continued on, even in the minds and works of some modernists.<sup>12</sup> On the other hand, Michael Saler agrees with Taylor's argument that art and literature are some of the vehicles of re-enchantment today, in particular that it can be found in

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<sup>7</sup> *ibid.*, p.35-43

<sup>8</sup> Like many, Taylor uses the common translation of Weber's word *entzauberung* as 'disenchantment', though I argue in favour of 'demagification', preferred by Marotta and others, or the 'turning away from enchantment' as explained later in this chapter. For this general overview 'disenchantment' will suffice, but it is problematic.

<sup>9</sup> *ibid.*, p. 38

<sup>10</sup> *ibid.*, p. 711 - 727

<sup>11</sup> *ibid.*, p.700 - 770

<sup>12</sup> J. A. Josephson-Storm, *The Myth of Disenchantment: Magic, Modernity, and the Birth of the Human Sciences*, Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2017, p.42

the writers of speculative fiction, for example, J.R.R. Tolkien, Isaac Asimov, and also in reference to the Cottingley fairies and the works that episode spawned. For Saler, modern writers and creatives ‘spend protracted periods of time “inhabiting” their imaginations, residing in virtual worlds, populated by characters drawn from the media.’ He argues that ‘the modern West ... can equally be deemed an enchanted place, in which imaginary worlds and fictional characters have replaced the sacred groves and tutelary deities of the pre-modern world.’<sup>13</sup>

Taylor, then, understands enchantment as structures or systems, and largely positions them historically, whereas Josephson-Storm and Saler argue in favour of an emotional representation of enchantment, where the imagination plays an integral part. The systems of enchantment are separate from humans, in Taylor’s understanding, requiring connection, but for Josephson-Storm and Saler, the emotions and meanings of enchantment are a part of humanity and human experience (Alister Hardy also may be making this point in his argument that belief in the supernatural is evolutionary), so for Taylor, enchantment is fixed into these historical roles of disenchantment and re-enchantment, but emotional understanding of enchantment allows it to be fundamentally human, and also fluid.

Pyyry and Aiava see enchantment as ‘a fundamental encounter that incites new worlds’ and an ‘immersive and life affirming moment.’<sup>14</sup> They see it as ‘radically re-ordering the world’, calling it the ‘simultaneous loss of meaning and sudden gaining of significance.’<sup>15</sup> They are not quite in accord with Jane Bennett who sees enchantment ‘as something that may hit you by surprise, but never entirely shut you down’<sup>16</sup> and is largely seen by her as a force for good, ‘trigger[ing] generosity for all life’s complexity and is therefore an important resource for ethical being.’<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> M. Saler, *As If: Modern Enchantment and the Literary Prehistory of Virtual Reality*, Oxford University Press, 2012, p.12

<sup>14</sup> N. Pyyry and Raine Aiava, *Enchantment as fundamental encounter: wonder and the radical re-ordering of subject/world*, in *Cultural Geographies*, 2020, vol. 27 (4) 581- 595

<sup>15</sup> *ibid*

<sup>16</sup> Pyyry, N., & Aiava, R. (2020), *op. cit.*, p.583

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, p.583



Pyry and Aiava argue that this idea ignores that ‘at the very core of the [enchantment] event, it is the shutting down of the self...as the starting point...’<sup>18</sup> and they go on to argue that enchantment is connected to ‘the troubling and exhilarating feeling that things could be different.’<sup>19</sup> And so, the practical attributes of enchantment are ‘the connective, transpersonal experience... [that] deepens human engagement with the world, and can then open up ethico-political space...’<sup>20</sup> They go on to give the example of despair (a not very enchanting emotion, one imagines), to illustrate how enchantment works, ‘there is something there, a disconnect, a detachment, a disorientation.’<sup>21</sup> For them, enchantment events have at their core, ‘the momentary uncertainty of everything’, and despair ‘calls one to act.’<sup>22</sup> Then they go on to define the enchanted experience as an ‘acute sensory experience, sense of wonder-at-the-world, the temporary suspension of time, the experience of pure presence and absence.’<sup>23</sup> What is interesting in the nature of fairy encounters is their similarity of ‘singularities’ that Bennett talks of, are recorded as ‘new colours, discern[ed] details previously ignored, ... extraordinary sounds...’<sup>24</sup> While many of the encounters recorded in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries occur to individuals, either alone or in company with non-participants, there is a commonality to be found in the collection of these encounters, that can perhaps then be classified as a post-occurrence shared experience, even though at the time, the encounter is hugely individual and personal. Pyry and Aiava go on to invoke Heidegger, famously antisemitic German philosopher and Nazi, who, nevertheless, had some things to say about enchantment, ‘distinguishes ‘wonder’ from the notion of mere curiosity.’<sup>25</sup> ‘In wonder, everything becomes most unusual.’<sup>26</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> Ibid p.583

<sup>19</sup> Latour, Bruno, *Reassembling the Social: An Introduction to Actor-Network-Theory* (Oxford, 2005; online edn, Oxford Academic, 31 Oct. 2023, accessed July 2024

<sup>20</sup> Pyry and Aiava, op. cit., p.583

<sup>21</sup> Ibid., p.584

<sup>22</sup> Ibid., p.585

<sup>23</sup> Ibid., p.586

<sup>24</sup> J. Bennett, *The Enchantment of Modern Life: Attachments, Crossings and Ethics*, Princeton University Press, 2001, p.4

<sup>25</sup> Pyry and Aiva, op. cit., p.586

<sup>26</sup> Ibid., p.586

So it is not merely the event, but all of the accompanying actions, everything becomes heightened. 'It is to be uprooted such that there is for that brief moment, nothing familiar, nothing ordinary.'<sup>27</sup> What this boils down to is a way of separating the sacred from the profane. Patrick Curry takes a quote from *Thomas the Rymer*, as the 'road less travelled.'<sup>28</sup> In the ballad, the Queen of Elfland shows Thomas three roads, the path of righteousness is 'thick beset wi' thorns and briers' while the path of wickedness is 'that braid, braid road/that lies across yon lillie leven.' But she intends to take him down the 'bonny road/which winds about the fernie brae/that is the road to fair Elfland/where you and I this night maun gae.'<sup>29</sup> Curry maintains the third road as 'problematised, discouraged and marginalised by every official programme, religious and secular.'<sup>30</sup> 'Faerie' as Curry calls it, is according to Tolkien, 'the realisation, independent of the consuming mind, of imagined wonder.'<sup>31</sup> Wonder, for Curry is similar to Pyry and Aiava's definition, though he goes further, saying that enchantment is also the act of the 'wonder becoming real.'<sup>32</sup> For Curry, wonder is 'the hallmark of enchantment.'<sup>33</sup> And this is certainly borne out in the collected fairy encounters recorded in this thesis. Curry's formula of 'animism plus Faerie plus enchantment' is well represented in the fairy encounters, and Curry maintains that in an enchanted space, 'everything is alive.'<sup>34</sup> For example, imagine being in an ordinary living room, and then for that space to be transformed by fairies: 'I fell asleep in the chair in the living room and woke at around 3 am. There was a green light coming from the clock on the video recorder (the video was broken – only the clock worked and was normally a blue light). Behind the clock digits was a faery face. A faery then flew out of the video in a shower of green light and flew round the room. Behind it was another which also flew out followed by

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<sup>27</sup> Ibid., p.586

<sup>28</sup> P. Curry, *The third road: Faërie in hypermodernity*, in Harvey, Graham. *The Handbook of Contemporary Animism*, Taylor & Francis Group, 2013, p.468

<sup>29</sup> Child, 1965, I: 323-4

<sup>30</sup> P. Curry, *The Third Road*, op.cit., p.468

<sup>31</sup> Ibid., p.469

<sup>32</sup> Ibid., p.469

<sup>33</sup> Ibid., p.469

<sup>34</sup> Ibid., p.470

more. They were all lining up one behind the other and came out in single file. There was also a large female faery (*sic*) in a purple dress. She was kneeling in front of the TV.’<sup>35</sup> Or imagine being in a car and this happens: ‘When we travelled to go on holiday, I would see several ‘people’ very beautiful, adult-height to me, but more like ‘angels’ who would stop at a certain place and bid me goodbye, so I felt. I would see them from the car. They would race alongside it, appearing and disappearing again as we passed woods and houses...’<sup>36</sup> Or imagine this display: ‘As I turned a corner, it was misty. The mist had a weird glow. As I walked into the low mist there was a procession. Around three feet tall. With lanterns! But in the mist, I paused, and they saw me. They came forward and I waited for them to pass.’<sup>37</sup> Every single one of these encounters, of whatever duration, ignites the space with enchantment, transforming everything.

Jane Bennett comes at enchantment from the refutation of the discourse of the disenchantment of modernity. She defines enchantment as ‘to be struck and shaken by the extraordinary that lives amid the familiar and the everyday.’<sup>38</sup> She further explains that the purpose of enchantment is to be ‘capable of donating some of one’s scarce mortal resources to the services of others.’ This is perhaps a strange aspect of enchantment to consider, that enchantment could be the inspiration to altruism on the part of the enchanted. And I am not sure what it could be about fairy enchantment that could persuade one to altruism. Fairies are traditionally out for themselves. Passive enchantment, which is not driven by any cognisant entity, is maybe what Bennett means, that enchantment affects us in this way, apart from just the general bonhomie that might come from the good feeling that enchantment might bring. But enchantment, used for power over another, that is the nature of fairy enchantment which is notoriously fairy serving. Historically, fairy enchantment always has a motivation. In Anglo-Saxon times, it was to keep humans away from fairy places, in the medieval period, it was to

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<sup>35</sup> S. Young, *Fairy Census Vol. i*, 2017, Ss125, op. cit., p.149

<sup>36</sup> *ibid.*, *Fairy Census Vol. i*, op cit., 2017, Ss 105, p.127-128

<sup>37</sup> *ibid.*, *Fairy Census Vol. i*, op. cit., 2017, Ss 114. p.136-137

<sup>38</sup> J. Bennett, *The Enchantment of Modern Life*, op. cit., p.4

attract humans with talents that the fairies needed, in the Early Modern period it was the bargaining and exchange of help, and also the trickster nature that enjoyed watching humans take a prat fall.<sup>39</sup> Bennett however also goes on to investigate the nature of the word ‘wonder’ and defines it as, ‘the temporary suspension of chronological time and bodily movement.’<sup>40</sup> ‘To be enchanted is to be transfixed, spellbound... to be both caught up and carried away.’<sup>41</sup> Both she and Curry note the etymological origins and influences of the word, ‘enchant’, which has links to ‘sing’ and ‘smile’.<sup>42</sup> This is of particular interest in fairy encounters, of which many are accompanied by music or at least some sound. Bennett also tackles the contrasting view that on the one hand, the poor and uneducated are *too* stupid to experience enchantment, and at the same time, the poor and uneducated are so stupid as to experience enchantment. ‘Only effete intellectuals have the luxury of feeling enchanted, whereas ‘real’ (my quotation marks) people must cope with the ‘real’ world.’<sup>43</sup> This is a fundamental point in the study of folklore in general, that there has always been the idea that the poor and uneducated have no business being enchanted, like it is a kind of dereliction of duty, or used against them as a denotation of naiveté. But Charles Dickens, that champion of the poor and uneducated, especially in his most magical novella, *A Christmas Carol*, shows that the poor can and do have wonder; Tiny Tim has it when he of all people really should not, being a child, and poor, *and* disabled, as Scrooge says to his poor nephew Fred, ‘what right have you to be merry, what reason have you to be merry, you’re poor enough!’<sup>44</sup> And indeed Dickens himself well understood the need for wonder when confronted with disenchantment, like being sent to work in a blacking factory at the age of twelve.<sup>45</sup> Another of Dickens’ characters, Mr Micawber is frivolously optimistic, full of wonder, just like Bennett’s example of Pangloss, in *Candide*.<sup>46</sup> And even Ebenezer Scrooge is

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<sup>39</sup> R. Hutton, *The Making of the Early Modern British Fairy Tradition*, 2014, *The Historical Journal*, 57(4), p.1135–1156.

<sup>40</sup> J. Bennett, op. cit., p.14

<sup>41</sup> Ibid., p.14

<sup>42</sup> J. Bennett, op. cit., p.15

<sup>43</sup> Pyry and Aiva, op. cit., p.475

<sup>44</sup> C. Dickens, *A Christmas Carol*, 1843, stave one

<sup>45</sup> J. Forster, *Life of Dickens*, 1867–68, p.329

<sup>46</sup> J. Bennett, op. cit., p.19

finally rewarded for his suspension of disbelief, after four supernatural, enchanted encounters, 'he became as good a friend, as good a master, and as good a man, as the good old city knew, or any other good old city, town, or borough, in the good old world.'<sup>47</sup> And such a contrast to the caustic clergyman St. John Rivers, in Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre*, who can only offer Jane a life of servitude to God, devoid of love. She is saved by enchantment, by the disembodied voice of her one true love, Mr Rochester, calling to her across the moors, tearing her away from the disenchanted St. John.<sup>48</sup>

Enchantment in fairy tales is an action, usually the taking over of the human will by a magical worker, either another human trained in or gifted with magical powers, like a witch or a wizard, or else a non-human magical creature, like a fairy. Enchantment is the beguiling or glamouring of a person or place, usually to enhance it, for varying motives. The enchanted people and places inevitably either have to be set free from the enchantment and returned to the 'real' world (or at least to the way the world was before) or experience the fading of the enchantment on its own, returning them to the 'real' world automatically. The closest we come to it in everyday life, is waking from a dream where everything felt real. And in general, notwithstanding, the enchantment is usually temporary. So, whether it is a negative or positive experience, or a positive experience for nefarious motives, or a negative experience for good or ill, an enchantment is not the 'real' state. And most enchantment narratives require that the world be returned to its 'real' state in the end. Examples include, Kai kidnapped by the Snow Queen, with a splinter of an evil troll mirror in his heart and eye, which keeps him tied to his oppressor, blind to his situation and separated from his loved ones. Only his beloved friend Gerda can remove the splinter from his heart (which she learns how to do by going on adventures on the way to finding him) in order to set him free from the Queen and restore him to

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<sup>47</sup> C. Dickens, *A Christmas Carol*, op. cit.

<sup>48</sup> C. Brontë, *Jane Eyre*, 1848

the 'real' world.<sup>49</sup> Snow White<sup>50</sup> and also Princess Aurora (from *The Sleeping Beauty*) are both placed into a death-like sleep from which only a kiss from their true love can wake them.<sup>51</sup>

Cinderella goes to the royal ball dressed and accompanied like a princess, thanks to her fairy godmother, but it all disappears on the stroke of midnight, except for one shoe, that she loses in her haste to get away before she's reduced to rags and tatters and her coach and entourage to a pumpkin and garden wildlife. In the end, the truth is revealed, Cinderella is accepted for her true identity, that of a scullery maid. The enchantment brought her to the attention of Prince Charming, but her happy ending took place in the 'real' world.<sup>52</sup>

Living in or experiencing an enchantment is clearly demonstrated in how we in the UK celebrate Christmas. If it were Christmas every day, it would no longer be special. So, the magic of the enchantment is in its temporality. In our current society, there is a promise, renewed every year, that Christmas will return. And in case we might forget, we are reminded almost from the end of summer, that we must get ready for Christmas. Culturally, in the UK at least, Christmas takes over for about a third of the year, from preparing, to getting ready, to celebrating, to taking down the decorations ready for the next one. Christmas is a truly transformative time, almost a right that everyone is entitled to, we see 'because it is Christmas' used to justify prison releases, forgiving punishments, donating money, presents and food to the less well off. While it has become a truly consumerist festival, that economically can make or break a business or service, or indeed, a family, there is an increase at this time in generosity to others, and to ourselves. While some may bemoan the decline in religious observance of Christmas, it is still the time when churches see a rise in their congregations, and in their receipt of donations. Physically, the landscape is transformed, through state and privately funded decorations, whole towns and villages are lit up with electric lights and Christmas trees. Shops, doctors'

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<sup>49</sup> H. C. Andersen, *The Snow Queen*, New Fairy Tales, First Volume, Second Collection, 1844

<sup>50</sup> The Brothers Grimm, Tale 53, *Schneewittchen*, Grimm's Fairy Tales, 1812

<sup>51</sup> C. Perrault, *The Sleeping Beauty in the Woods*, 1697

<sup>52</sup> C. Perrault, Cendrillon, *Histoires ou contes du temps passé*, 1697

waiting rooms, car showrooms for example, pump out popular Christmas music. Appeals by charities come thick and fast, and many charities find their coffers boosted by the Christmas spirit. It is true too, that people overspend, overeat and overdrink at Christmas, that there are heightened incidents of domestic violence, car accidents, mental health crises too. But, by the time that Twelfth Night comes around, most of us are ready for the enchantment to end, fully in the knowledge that in a few short months, the whole enterprise will get going again. Although the religious element of Christmas can be found in pockets throughout the country, Christmas in the twenty-first century is very much an example of Landy and Saler's 'secular' enchantment. More of which, later.<sup>53</sup>

A fundamental part of human behaviour is that we can get addicted to many different things, both real and also imaginary. If we experience something enchanting, then of course we want to experience it again. We are addictive in our emotional experiences, and we suffer grief when the focus of our addiction is taken away, or if we have to give it up because it is causing us to neglect our 'real' lives. Edmund, the recalcitrant of the four special children of C. S. Lewis' *Chronicles of Narnia*, who stumbles into Narnia behind his younger sister, encounters the enchantment of magical Turkish delight, given to him by the evil White Witch.<sup>54</sup> When he returns, without his siblings, but full of the longing for more enchantment, he is instead imprisoned and given bread and water. Further longing is illustrated in Christina Rossetti's *Goblin Market*. It is a good illustration of an addiction story, and also (as was probably its main theme), a story with a moral. The errant sister can no longer see or hear the goblins, nor have a repeat portion of their fruits. She almost dies because of it; she almost dies of longing. It is only when her sister, never tasting the 'goblin fruits' gets the creatures to cover her with the pulp and juice of their wares, so that her poor sister can taste them once again and as a consequence,

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<sup>53</sup> J. Landy and M. Saler, (Eds.). (2009). *The Re-Enchantment of the World: Secular Magic in a Rational Age* (1st ed.). Stanford University Press, p.1-15

<sup>54</sup> C. S. Lewis, *The Lion, The Witch and the Wardrobe*, 1950

be set free from the enchantment. There is another sacrificial rescue from enchantment, when the fairy knight, Tam Lin is kidnapped by the Queen of the fairies so that she can pay the 'teind to Hell' due every seven years.<sup>55</sup> His bride-to-be Janet has to wait until Halloween, then when the fairy train passes by, she will see him on his horse and must pull him down and cover him with her cloak. The fairies try to get him back by transforming him into vicious or poisonous creatures, but Janet holds him fast, and the fairies give up, and Tam Lin is restored to human form and the human world. In the Medieval period, there are accounts of visions of Fairyland, usually banqueting halls full of food, drink and feasting, but the whole enchantment can be dispelled by holding up a communion wafer or speaking the name of Jesus.<sup>56</sup> Shakespeare demonstrates the power of enchantment by equating it to dreaming. In his play, *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, the woods of Athens and some of the inhabitants are transformed by enchantment for one night, the magical night of the year, the Summer Solstice, or Midsummer Night. Shakespeare's fairies are benevolent. Tricksy, but ultimately they do the right thing. Titania admonishes her husband that their quarrels are causing storms, hurricanes and other natural disasters around them. Oberon is angered to see the poor way Demetrius treats Helena, and pities her dogged devotion to him, 'I am your spaniel!'<sup>57</sup> But when Puck mixes the four lovers up, causing two true lovers to quarrel and fight, Oberon insists he puts it right. And Bottom the Weaver has the most transformative experience of all, though he never knows it. He accepts it because he thinks his night of passion with the fairy Queen is a dream. He has no idea that his head has been transformed into a donkey's. Shakespeare uses this as a metaphor for the theatre, while gently mocking the amateur players, he presents an apologia for enchantment in the final act, and Puck delivers it to the audience, breaking the 'fourth wall' and

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<sup>55</sup> Child, Francis James, ed. (1890). *"Tam Lin". English and Scottish Popular Ballads*. Vol. I Part 2. Boston: Houghton Mifflin and Company. pp. 335–358.

<sup>56</sup> Green, R. F. (2016). *Elf Queens and Holy Friars: Fairy Beliefs and the Medieval Church*, op. cit., p. 7

<sup>57</sup> W. Shakespeare, *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, 1596, Act 2 sc. 1, op. cit.



effectively the enchantment of the play. ‘You have but slumbered here, while these visions did appear.’<sup>58</sup>

Very recently, philosopher Helen De Cruz has been looking at how ‘wonder and awe shape the way we think.’<sup>59</sup> Wonder and awe are the emotional reactions that we have to enchantment scenarios, ‘Awe is the emotion we sense when we perceive or conceptualise vastness, combined with a need for cognitive accommodation... wonder is the emotion that arises from a glimpse at the unknown terrain which lies just beyond the fringes of our current understanding.’<sup>60</sup> Both of these definitions are excellent descriptions for the experiences of supernatural encounters, and in particular fairy encounters. According to the participants in fairy encounters, awe and wonder transform the landscape, even for a second or two, with the sense of something bigger than themselves, which in many cases, can cause the participant to change some of their core beliefs because of the encounter, and also for the realisation that what is being experienced is beyond the everyday. For De Cruz, experiences that create awe and wonder are ‘an important and enduring aspect of being human,’<sup>61</sup> a thought, similar to that of Alistair Hardy’s human evolutionary biological imperative of supernatural experiences, a hypothesis he dedicated his academic life to after retirement.<sup>62</sup> De Cruz recognises that while awe and wonder have some distinction between them, her reason ‘for treating awe and wonder together is the historical close connection between them in Western theorising.’<sup>63</sup> What they have in common, she asserts is that they are ‘epistemic emotions... that motivate us to explore our environment and learn more about it.’<sup>64</sup> She compares the experience of these emotions with ‘curiosity, doubt... and surprise,’<sup>65</sup> and equates it with ‘the feeling of knowing’, that ‘wonder

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<sup>58</sup> W. Shakespeare, *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*, op. cit., Act 5

<sup>59</sup> H. De Cruz, *Wonderstruck*, Princeton University Press, 2024, p.4

<sup>60</sup> *ibid.*, p5

<sup>61</sup> *Ibid.*, p.4

<sup>62</sup> A. Hardy, *The Living Stream*, op. cit., pp. 9-40

<sup>63</sup> H. De Cruz, op. cit., p.4

<sup>64</sup> *ibid.*, p.5

<sup>65</sup> *ibid.*, p.5

is a useful emotion because it points to gaps in what you thought you knew.<sup>66</sup> De Cruz then describes awe and wonder as ‘self-transcendent emotions: they help us move away from a focus on ourselves, and our own concerns.’<sup>67</sup> And perhaps this also chimes with Bennett’s idea that wonder increases our altruism. She concludes by pointing out that while awe and wonder help us ‘to learn more about the world and ourselves,’ ultimately we have to take a step back and ‘defamiliarise ourselves.’<sup>68</sup> Does that mean then, that the things that create awe and wonder in us, are both familiar and strange? Recently I experienced a spectacular sunrise over the North sea, a completely awe inspiring event that I had not observed closely for many years. Yet it takes place every single day, is the most commonplace and the most expected event. In that moment, though I was wonderstruck. And I think this is true of many awe inspiring natural events, sunsets, unusual cloud formations, murmurations of birds, the thunder of wildebeest across the plains, all of which happen daily and yet we observe them rarely and perceive them as novelty.

This thesis not only tries to represent the nature of fairy sightings, the kinds of people who see fairies and the kinds of fairies that are seen, it also, as mentioned before, looks at ‘what cultural work they are doing,’<sup>69</sup> and De Cruz also notes how ‘awe and wonder are part of our cultural environment.’<sup>70</sup> She asks, as this thesis also asks in terms of fairy belief, ‘why humans engage in philosophy, religious reflection, mathematics, art and science.’<sup>71</sup> Her answer, after lengthy discussion seems to be that it is what makes life worth living.<sup>72</sup> For many people, for most people, it is not enough that we live in an impossible universe, on a planet full of awe-inspiring wonders, natural, human made, imagined, there needs to be a transcendent force behind it too; a creator God, an intelligent designer, an elemental spirit, a ‘force which through the green fuse

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<sup>66</sup> *ibid.* p.5

<sup>67</sup> *ibid.* p.6

<sup>68</sup> *ibid.* p.6

<sup>69</sup> R. Green, *Elf Queens and Holy Friars*, *op. cit.*, p.12

<sup>70</sup> H. De Cruz, *op. cit.* p.6

<sup>71</sup> *ibid.* p.7

<sup>72</sup> *ibid.*, p.16

drives the flower.<sup>73</sup> In the end, enchantment is how humans see the world, ‘not with the eyes, but with the mind.’<sup>74</sup>

### **The disenchantment of the world**

Contrary to established thinking around disenchantment or *entzauberung* and to the consequent discussion about re-enchantment, there does not appear to be a time when enchantment discourses were not a part of our culture. That the Enlightenment in the *long durée* documented the rise of science and discovery, causing the fragmentation of the dominance over much of the West by religious institutions, perhaps cannot be doubted, and as a global overview, or at least a western world view there is plenty of evidence to support this, however it does not necessarily mean that the people *en masse* became more rational and turned away from enchantment discourses such as religion, mysticism, folklore and magic.<sup>75</sup> In fact, it could be argued that the Enlightenment relocated enchantment to the sciences, which can in themselves create wonder and awe. It is the Protestant Reformation, more than the advancement of science and philosophy, that was arguably the most forceful, concerted and widespread (across Europe, at least) attempt at disenchantment.<sup>76</sup> It is ironic, that a religious movement that relied on signs and wonders for its persuasion of the masses to follow it in the beginning, (Jesus in the gospels performs miracles to attract the crowds before he teaches), turned and sought to obliterate any reference to anything ‘wonderful’ that it could possibly find. Not only are saints, relics and miracles removed from worship, so is art, sculpture and music (for a time). How interesting then, that it is in a Puritan enclave where the unequivocal signs and wonders of witchcraft belief are manifest, causing life changing events that still reverberate through history. The Salem Witch Trials, perhaps are, amongst other things, the cautionary tale

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<sup>73</sup> Dylan Thomas, *18 Poems*, 1934

<sup>74</sup> W. Shakespeare, *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, 1596, Act One, Scene One op. cit.

<sup>75</sup> Cascardi A. J. *The “disenchantment” of the world*. In: *The Subject of Modernity. Literature, Culture, Theory*. Cambridge University Press; 1992: p.16-71.

<sup>76</sup> P. S. Gorski, *From Disenchantment to Disruption*, [www.reflections.yale.edu](http://www.reflections.yale.edu), 2017, accessed May 2025

that demonstrates the consequences of suppressing wonder.<sup>77</sup> As a religious and political enterprise, it is shameful, but as a demonstration of the negative side of enchantment, it is full of what Jane Bennett called being ‘caught up and carried away.’<sup>78</sup> The testimonies of the children who were the first accusers in the trials are truly fantastic and wonderful. There were three key pieces of evidence, firstly, so-called, ‘spectral evidence:’ the three girls taken ill initially ‘screamed, threw things about the room, uttered strange sounds, crawled under furniture, and contorted themselves into peculiar positions.’<sup>79</sup> They also complained of ‘being pinched and pricked with pins.’<sup>80</sup> When testifying, these girls and others, all swore they were able to see the ‘spectre’ of the person who was ‘afflicting’ them.<sup>81</sup> Then there was the making of a ‘witch cake’<sup>82</sup> by Samuel Parris’ housekeeper, which Parris actually blamed for unleashing Satan on the community, more so than the affliction of the children. It is this overt recall to folklore and folk tradition that the housekeeper falls back on that most offends Samuel Parris, that a member of his household should so easily return to the traditions from which their very community was supposed to have taken themselves away.<sup>83</sup> Finally, there was the so-called ‘touch test.’ The accused witches were blindfolded and then made to touch the ‘afflicted’ children. It was believed that the ‘afflictions’ being sent out by the witches, would then be removed by those same witches, effectively cancelling out the ‘afflictions.’<sup>84</sup> It certainly beggars modern belief that such ‘evidence’ could have been accepted in a court of law at any age, let alone the seventeenth century, and there were protests at the time that were eventually heard, though not in time to save the twenty-four people executed or left to die in horrific prison

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<sup>77</sup> S. Schiff, *The Witches: Salem, 1692*, Little, Brown and Company, 2016, p.3-14

<sup>78</sup> J. Bennett, op. cit., p.14

<sup>79</sup> D. Lawson, *A Brief Narrative of Some Remarkable Passages at Salem Village*, 1692, p.2-64

<sup>80</sup> A. Nichols, "Salem Witch Trials: Elizabeth Hubbard" [saalem.lib.virginia.edu/people/hubbard.html](http://saalem.lib.virginia.edu/people/hubbard.html)

<sup>81</sup> Kreutter, Sarah (April 2013). "The Devil's Specter: Spectral Evidence and the Salem Witchcraft Crisis". *The Spectrum: A Scholars Day Journal*. 2: Article 8. Archived from the original on November 16, 2017.

<sup>82</sup> This piece of folklore was the mixing of rye with the urine of the afflicted children then fed to a dog, was meant to cure the afflictions, but it had no effect on the children.

<sup>83</sup> Salem Village Church Records, pp. 10–12

<sup>84</sup> Boyer, Paul S.; Nissenbaum, Stephen, eds. (1972), *Salem-Village Witchcraft: A Documentary Record of Local Conflict in Colonial New England*, Northeastern University Press, p.971

conditions.<sup>85</sup> What Salem demonstrates though, is that there had been no turning away from enchantment, at least not on the part of the inhabitants of Massachusetts in the sixteen hundreds, that clearly there was strong belief in the supernatural and its powers, and that the overarching Puritan narrative that sought to quash belief in the otherworldly, actually exacerbated it.

It is Weber, three hundred years after Salem, writing in 1917 who draws attention to *entzauberung*, which was, and mostly still is characterised as ‘disenchantment.’<sup>86</sup> This choice of translation seemingly implies that the activity of disenchantment is somehow a detached and passive one. Mario Marotta argues that the proper translation from the German of *entzauberung* is closer to ‘demagification’ or a ‘turning away from enchantment’ the latter of which perhaps suggests agency on the people, or the movement, or at least gives a sense of consciousness of what is going on. This was not a passive, inevitable stage of history, but a conscious and possibly dangerous movement, that both created great advances in philosophy, politics and science, but also attempted to suppress something inherent to human experience, the nature of belief in the non-material world.<sup>87</sup> One of the key disenchantment doctrines to come from Friedrich Nietzsche’s writings is that people could still point to examples of God being alive, and by God this can be interpreted as all religious, spiritual and magical belief. Nietzsche may have argued that all of the so-called evidence was merely an indication that we could not accept the truth and were living in denial, but this could be construed as a case of special pleading. I have already argued that it is not only science and industry that has disenchanted the world, but also and possibly predominantly, religion, certainly mainstream and in particular, Protestant Christian religion, which has done so too, beginning with the Reformation of the 1500s, and continuing today. Christopher Partridge highlights Weber’s use

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<sup>85</sup> S. Schiff, op. cit., pp.407-418

<sup>86</sup> Marotta, M. (2023). A disenchanted world: Max Weber on magic and modernity. *Journal of Classical Sociology*, 24(3), 224-242.

<sup>87</sup> Ibid., p.225

of the example of Judaism and later Christianity as beginning the process of disenchantment by 'setting up a dichotomy between the 'sacred' and 'profane' aspects of reality [which] established an intellectual framework within which secularisation was almost bound to occur.'<sup>88</sup> Christianity, since the ministry of Jesus and the actions of the New Testament prior to the Reformation, certainly recognised the need for 'magic' in order to attract the congregation, in the form of miracles, visions and superstitions, but confined only within the church auspices, so that any other 'magic' or supernatural abilities were consigned to the Devil and either persecuted or ignored.<sup>89</sup> And these types of practices were fiercely stamped out by Protestant reformers, so that anything even vaguely esoteric was seen as idolatrous.<sup>90</sup> I have referred to the Salem Witch Trials as an illustration of the consequences of suppression of 'signs and wonders'. Accused and convicted witches in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, some of whom named fairies as their familiars, were seemingly so accused because they implied (or overtly demonstrated) a connection to nature and otherworldliness that did not come from God. And in the rigid binary theology of the reformers, that meant they came from Hell. I should add that, I am not trying to say that the Catholic church was any more *au fait* with the fairies or other supernatural beings, far from it, however, the Catholics did encourage supernatural belief and superstition in a way that was anathema to Protestantism. And after centuries of visions of the Virgin Mary and the Saints, of throwing salt over your shoulder in the face of the Devil or keeping a rosary under the pillow of an ailing infant, it is a hard habit to break even when confronted with the hangman's noose. The view from the pulpit even in modern Protestantism could be viewed as a dry, ascetic, barren land, devoid of enchantment, just as much as the

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<sup>88</sup> C. Partridge, *The Re-enchantment of the West*, Vol 1, p.9

<sup>89</sup> Olukpe, I. M. (2019). *Beyond Science: A Look at the Biblical Christian View of the Supernatural*. Journal of Research on Christian Education, 28(2), p.193–209.

<sup>90</sup> Eire, Carlos, *Redefining the Sacred and the Supernatural: How the Protestant Reformation Really Did Disenchant the World*, in Thomas Albert Howard, and Mark A. Noll (eds), *Protestantism after 500 Years* (New York, 2016; online edn, Oxford Academic, 18 Aug. 2016), accessed July 2024

materialist and consumerist secular world. However, Marrotta, Bennett and Curry, contest the whole disenchantment narrative out of hand.

### **Re-enchantment**

Our fascination with and our increasing skill for rewriting and redrawing the past contributes significantly to the ways in which we can enchant the present. The present has always needed such an enterprise at whatever point in history we choose to examine.

But while the established church may have been losing their significant power to enchant, there was, according to Landy and Saler, 'a new, thoroughly secular strategy for re-enchantment' taking place.<sup>91</sup> Their perspective on the nature of disenchantment and re-enchantment seeks to move as far as possible away from three re-enchantment discourses, which they find undermine the dominant discourse which has governed modernity, 'fully secular and deliberate strategies...of which no-one need feel ashamed.'<sup>92</sup> So what are these secular strategies? The book goes on to collect a selection of articles, which explore nature, language, popular culture, entertainment, all deriving from a secular origin. 'There must be a way of carving out within the fully profane world, a set of spaces which somehow possess the allure of the sacred.'<sup>93</sup> So what they are proposing is a re-enchantment based on secular miracles and epiphanies, 'offering fully secularised subjects and affirmation of existence that does not come at the cost of naiveté, irrationalism or hypocrisy.'<sup>94</sup> Where do fairies fit in to this hypothesis? Are they sacred or secular, both? Neither? Landy and Saler would probably classify them as 'throwbacks' which they want to avoid, but fairies tend to sidestep definition, whoever it is who tries to impose a framework upon them.

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<sup>91</sup> Landy and Saler, *The Re-enchantment of the World*, op. cit., p.2

<sup>92</sup> *ibid.* p. 2

<sup>93</sup> *ibid.* p.2

<sup>94</sup> *ibid.* p.2

Landy and Saler reject resurgence of the 'old' ways, that modernity is secretly enchanted unbeknownst to it, that modernity accepts contraries.<sup>95</sup> They are arguing for 'modern enchantment which simultaneously enchants and disenchants, which delights but does not delude.'<sup>96</sup> I do not doubt that secularism has as much to offer to the process of enchantment or re-enchantment in modern times, but I do not think that enchantment can be limited in this or any other way, otherwise how would it enchant? Landy and Saler talk at length about the influence of Spiritualism and all that entails, rather deprecatingly, as a representation of their 'binary model' which includes any reference or resurgence of religious or neo-religious ideas, and they also, perhaps rightly, highlight the fact that superstition and even imagination is 'relegated to the ghettos of popular culture.'<sup>97</sup> Their main objection seems to be the placing of imagination against reason, and therefore they are looking for a way to enchant reason so that the overall hypothesis, that modernity and secularity can still cause awe and wonder. But I think they are trying to force the framework onto the idea, throwing the baby of belief out with the bathwater of disenchantment, forgetting that it is belief and imagination, and how we see the world, as Helen De Cruz has it, that bring us to a state of wonder.

Where Landy and Saler seem to find that alternative spiritualities are a minimal, even unimportant example of re-enchantment, barely worth their notice, Christopher Partridge is more open to 'new ways of believing in societies in which the old ways are inhibited and declining.'<sup>98</sup> He, quite rightly, disagrees with 'fellow academics' who do not see the richness and variety of non-traditional spiritualities and only want to highlight the efficacy of 'secularity', and decries the fact that some believe that 'just because new ways of believing are not allied to the state or located in large buildings next to the village green, they are socially insignificant.'<sup>99</sup> And while he does not reject out of hand the theories of secularisation, he is 'firmly of the

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<sup>95</sup> *ibid.* p.3

<sup>96</sup> *ibid.* p.3

<sup>97</sup> *ibid.* p.3

<sup>98</sup> C. Partridge, *The Re-Enchantment of the West*, Vol. 1, p.1

<sup>99</sup> *ibid.* p.2



opinion that interdisciplinarity is the way forward in the study of religion and culture.<sup>100</sup>

Partridge proposes a model for re-enchantment, 'not one of Christian revivalist optimism'<sup>101</sup> but one of a 'new religio-cultural milieu.' He goes on to assert that, 'what we are witnessing in the West is a confluence of secularisation and sacralisation. Spiritualities are emerging that are not only quite different from the dying forms of religion, but are often defined over against them, and are articulated in ways that do not carry the baggage of traditional religion.'<sup>102</sup> This is what Partridge refers to, a mixture of 'new spiritual awakening...that both resources and is resourced by popular culture' as 'occulture.'<sup>103</sup>

By coincidence 1917, when Weber presented his ideas in disenchantment, is the same year the Cottingley girls took their first fake fairy photographs. When Weber published his ideas in 1920, Sir Arthur Conan Doyle published the Cottingley fairy photographs with an article in the *Strand Magazine* sparking a renewed interest in the supernatural and a brief but intense period of fairy mania.<sup>104</sup> Regardless of the fraudulent aspect to the Cottingley affair, what it seemed to highlight is the propensity of humankind to want to believe in a non-material, enchanted world. Rather than killing off belief, the Reformation and the Enlightenment, probably inadvertently, also provoked a resurgence of belief and spirituality, not just established religiosity, but new and renewed belief systems.<sup>105</sup> But it could be further argued, not that the Enlightenment was responsible for re-enchantment, but that enchantment never really went away, and as strict religious belief and practice began to withdraw from or at least to relinquish their hold upon society and the people during the Enlightenment, 'philosophers, artists, architects, poets, stage magicians and ordinary citizens made it possible to enjoy many of the benefits previously

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<sup>100</sup> *ibid.* p.2

<sup>101</sup> *ibid.* p.3

<sup>102</sup> *ibid.*, p.5

<sup>103</sup> *ibid.*, p.5

<sup>104</sup> A. C. Doyle, *The Coming of the Fairies*, Hodder and Stoughton, 1922, p.16

<sup>105</sup> P. Marshall (2011). *Disenchantment and Re-enchantment in Europe, 1250 -1920* [Review of *Enchanted Europe: superstition, reason, and religion, 1250- -1750*; *Milton's angels: the early-modern imagination*; *Spectres of the self: thinking about ghosts and ghosts-seeing in England, 1750-1920*, by E. Cameron, J. Raymond, & S. McCorristine]. *The Historical Journal*, 54(2), p.599–606.

offered by faith, without having to subscribe to a creed...'<sup>106</sup> Fairies, from Cottingley and beyond, play a part in this re-enchantment of the world certainly, but, arguably, fairies have always been at the fringes of belief and society, quietly and patiently appearing and disappearing and interweaving their enchanted paths throughout recorded and unrecorded history. While they may be part of the sweep of 'secular strategies' to re-enchant a world laid bare by rationalism and materialism, they have been, and continue to be, a part of non-secular strategies as well.

### **Fairies and Enchantment: the Weaponisation of Wonder**

So, while there is an overarching social and cultural narrative of enchantment of the world and all that entails, there is also the kind of practical enchantment used by fairies to get what they want. As discussed, part of the magic of enchantment lies in its finite quality. This works well for the fairies, as they only need to use enchantment for a short duration. Ways in which fairies have enchanted through the years, are through visions, usually of feasting and revelry, especially in the Medieval period, through beguiling young women and young men, through abundant landscapes full of flowers, blossoms, fruits, through sumptuous palaces beautifully furnished and bedecked, through music and lights. None of these enchantments are meant to last beyond their usefulness, and their usefulness is to lure humans into the fairies' power, to do things for them. The fairies are by no means the only entities which can enchant our world. But they are peculiar in the way that they do it in comparison with other folkloric and supernatural entities. As has been previously discussed, fairies and fairy-like beings seem to have been in the world as long as there have been humans to talk about them and they come with enchantment. Because they are humanoid, no matter what era they appear in, the fairies' features, clothes and occupations, the organisation of their communities, all are as close to humanity as it is possible to be, without being completely different. In that respect then, fairies

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<sup>106</sup> Landy and Saler, op. cit., p.6

belong to this world, and though they may inhabit secret places, or even different dimensions, they are present in this world, and so the enchantment they bring, comes from this world. But being one remove from humanity is all that is needed, they are like us, but not, and in that small remove, they enchant.

The story of the fairy ointment, which was first collected by Joseph Jacobs in the late eighteen hundreds, and included in Andrew Lang's *The Lilac Fairy Book*, is a good example of the use of enchantment to obtain human help. A fairy man kidnaps a midwife to bring her to help his wife give birth. When she comes to his house, it is a great mansion, with rich and luxurious furnishings: 'in we went through a big hall and great rooms all painted in fine green colours, with red and gold bands and ornaments, and the finest carpets and chairs and tables and window curtains, and grand ladies and gentlemen walking about. At last, we came to a bedroom, with a beautiful lady in bed, with a fine bouncing boy beside her. The lady clapped her hands, and in came the Dark Man and kissed her and the baby, and praised me.'<sup>107</sup> The human midwife was then asked to cover the baby in a green ointment, which she does, but as she is doing this, she gets some in her eye, and the scene is transformed to its 'real' state: The beautiful room was a big, rough cave, with water oozing over the edges of the stones and through the clay; and the lady, and the lord, and the child wizened, poverty-bitten creatures—nothing but skin and bone—and the rich dresses were old rags.'<sup>108</sup> The story does not end well of course, in spite of the kindness of the human and the mendacity of the fairy folk. The midwife sees the fairy man again, sometime later, at the market, stealing goods from the stallholders without their knowledge as he was invisible to them. The midwife speaks to the fairy, asking after his wife and child, and he seems very taken aback to be directly addressed. The ointment that she had got in her eye was still working, and now the fairy man knew it. He crept up behind her, and blinded her

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<sup>107</sup> A. Lang, *The Lilac Fairy Book*, Longmans, Green and Co., 1844 – 1912, p. 19

<sup>108</sup> *Ibid.*, p.20

permanently, 'she never saw a glimmer after with that one till the day of her death.'<sup>109</sup> John Kruse uses this story as a way to show how close fairies and humans are, and that all it takes is a special ointment for humans to be able to see fairies and fairyland.<sup>110</sup> That seems to be the only divide, that could be so easily resolved if one but knew the recipe. And perhaps this is the opportune space to look more closely at examples of fairy magic, the practical side of fairy enchantment, not just the glamourisation of a space, but the ability to change and transform.

### **Fairy Magic**

Whatever else they are associated with, whatever folklore, tales and encounters, perhaps the most distinctive is the fairies' magical abilities. 'Fairies are closely identified with powers of magic and illusion... The form of sorcery most intimately connected with the elfin folk is that of enchantment, illusion, or, to employ its eloquent Scottish equivalent, 'glamourie.' So asserts Lewis Spence in his chapter in *British Fairy Origins*, from 1946.<sup>111</sup> When we think of magical practitioners, we probably think in terms of a general capacity to do anything if you possess magical powers, and that may also be true of fairies. But what is associated most closely with them, is the most common in fairy tales and folklore, is the magic of delusion. John Kruse's new book on fairy magic seeks to examine the nature of fairy magic, 'to try and determine their exact nature and the precise manner in which they are wielded.'<sup>112</sup> Kruse also seeks to point out that humans are not indefensible against fairy magic, and also that fairy magic is not 'impregnable.'<sup>113</sup>

I have previously mentioned the story of the fairy ointment, which occurs and recurs in many tales across the UK. Kruse focuses not on the story of the ointment itself, and its consequences, (which also represents the mendacity and cruelty of the fairies in general.) but

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<sup>109</sup> Ibid., p.19-20

<sup>110</sup> J. Kruse, *Fairy Ointment*, in [www.Britishfairies.com](http://www.Britishfairies.com), 2017, accessed 2025

<sup>111</sup> J. Kruse, *Faery Magic Powers*, 2024, p.3

<sup>112</sup> Ibid., p.3

<sup>113</sup> Ibid., p.4

the notion that all fairy babies must have the ointment applied to them after birth. And what also seems to be important is that it has to be applied by a human and not the fairy parents. According to Kruse, this seems to be how fairies become magical beings, because if the ointment is not applied, the implication is that the fairy child remains, well, ordinary.<sup>114</sup> It also implies, because that's what happens in the tales, that the ointment can make anyone (humans) magical too, or at least gives them the ability to see fairies and experience fairyland. And that also seems to be what angers the fairies the most.<sup>115</sup>

Part of the whole fairy mystique, of course, is how private they are. They appear and disappear whenever they want to (although modern fairy spirituality is moving in the direction of conjuring fairies into a non-physical liminal space<sup>116</sup>), they control how much humans can perceive them and even enter their spaces. According to Kruse, fairies delight in tricking us, 'malicious teasing and torture.'<sup>117</sup> Why? Because fairies know us, 'they know that we are greedy and selfish and that we will become hypnotised by money and precious metals.'<sup>118</sup> Hence the glamourisation of fairy gold, treasure, jewels, that within a day change back into leaves, acorns, or disappear completely.

Glamour is most associated with the fairies, from medieval times at least. Fairies can manipulate landscapes, buildings, clothes, bodies, faces, and even the weather. In the *Fairy Census* and other accounts of encounters, some of the participants have talked about a change in atmosphere, a change in temperature and even light and dark during a fairy encounter. These phenomena are often associated with stories of being pixey-led too.

Fairies are notoriously unseen, and Sir Walter Scott discovered that the use of 'fern seed', another herbal intervention that fairies use, though its actual properties seem to question

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<sup>114</sup> J. Kruse, op. cit., p.5

<sup>115</sup> *ibid.*, 6

<sup>116</sup> See Chapter 8, Fairy Practitioners

<sup>117</sup> J. Kruse, op. cit., p.8

<sup>118</sup> *ibid.*, p.8

whether it is a real herb or not: 'the fern seed, which is supposed to become visible only on St. John's Eve, and at the very moment when the Baptist was born, it is held by the vulgar to be under the special protection of the queen of Faery.'<sup>119</sup> What is notable about this description, is the conflation of traditional and Christian folklore. Nowadays, there is a marked distinction between mainstream religion and New Age beliefs, a desire probably coming from both sides, that the other is not the orthodoxy, yet as has been discussed elsewhere in this thesis, Christianity has had a longer influence upon folklore than most New Age history will allow.<sup>120</sup>

As well as invisibility, fairies are also adept at shapeshifting. Katharine Briggs notes how it is a feat 'common in a greater or lesser degree to fairies... not all fairies are shapeshifters.'<sup>121</sup> This power fits in with all of these kinds of enchantment, designed to deceive. Kruse believes it is a way for fairies to 'move about unnoticed, or perhaps more conveniently' which certainly implies they are also up to no good.<sup>122</sup> Boggarts, as has been discussed elsewhere, exist mainly in the forms of other creatures. Historically, according to Shakespeare and contemporaries, Puck, like the Boggart needs no special herb or seed to change aspect, 'Neighing in likeness of a filly foal: And sometime lurk I in a gossip's bowl, In very likeness of a roasted crab...' <sup>123</sup>

In the end, there is no doubt that the fairies, above all, desire privacy. They do not want to be seen, recognised, or heard. As discussed enchantment in general relies on its rarity and also temporality in order to be effective. And the magical powers outlined here, invisibility, shapeshifting, glamour, designed to enchant, but also to beguile and entice humans fit in with the characteristics most associated with fairies.

In the Medieval Period, records show stories of feasts and dancing, of the courts of the Fairy King and Queen, which the church believed would lead people astray.<sup>124</sup> In the Early Modern

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<sup>119</sup> J. Kruse, op. cit., p. 16

<sup>120</sup> *ibid.*, p.16

<sup>121</sup> K. Briggs, *Dictionary of Fairies, Shapeshifting*, p.361,

<sup>122</sup> J. Kruse, op. cit., p. 18

<sup>123</sup> W. Shakespeare, *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, Act 2, Scene 1, op. cit.

<sup>124</sup> R. Firth Green, *Elf Queens and Holy Friars*, op. cit., p.18

Period, according to confessions and court documents of accused witches, fairy revels were occasions for compacts with the Devil.<sup>125</sup> And in the Fairy Census, 'An invisible wall that I walked into and could not pass made me look up from the ground cover. A life size figure on a white horse. The figure was green, neither male or female, appeared to be made of light as the shoulders were exaggerated and faded into the air.'<sup>126</sup>

What can be concluded from this brief examination of the vast topic of enchantment and the role of fairies in it? Our reality is full of natural, passive moments of enchantment, of expensive, human made enchantments, and the occasional supernatural enchantments. Fairies inhabit both the sociological, grand scale nature of enchantment, as just one example in the many of supernatural entities, but they also have their peculiar, selfish use of enchantment, their currency with their interactions with the human world, primarily, as we have seen with fairy tales, ballads and folklore, to trick, beguile, trade and manipulate. Quite where the new wise fairies (whom the New Age fairy practitioners want us to consult for our own good) fit into this tradition of fairy magic, remains to be seen.

Whether we see enchantment in the form of responses to cultural change, or as an intrinsic part of human history and existence, fairies are integral to it. Fairies are very definitely enchanted creatures, and not only because of their decorative quality, but because they can and do manipulate it for and against humans, They've learned over the centuries how easy it is to beguile us and if the ubiquity of modern fairy encounters is to be believed, continue to do so.

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<sup>125</sup> Emma Wilby, *Cunning Folk and Familiar Spirits*, op. cit., p.

<sup>126</sup> *Fairy Census*, Vol. I, op. cit., ss177, p.211-212





## Chapter Seven

### Fairy Spirituality

‘In most academic accounts of contemporary spirituality-beyond-religion there is a distinct lack of attention given to the ‘mystery’ or ‘otherworldliness’ of such spiritualities, and how this may affect the everyday world as we know it.’

*Sara Mackian*<sup>1</sup>

“It is only with the heart that one can see rightly. What is essential is invisible to the eye.”

*Antoine de Saint-Exupery*<sup>2</sup>

In this chapter I want to examine how spirituality is regarded today, how fairies went from supernatural to spiritual, (by which I mean the surprise, usually solitary encounter that may have a profound effect on the participant, but is usually a one-off occurrence that will fade with time, to the devotional cultivation of a relationship, including veneration, ritual and prayer, as seen in mainstream religion), the particular influence of Theosophy on fairy belief, fairy culture, and fairy spirituality, and finally, a summary of some of the influencers and groups that have formed part of the growing movement of fairy spirituality that has been enjoying popularity since the twentieth century.

In some ways, the medieval person was perhaps more spiritual than we are today, in that the religious practices, superstitions and even the vernacular spirituality of the time, were part of everyday life, not an additional practice that you had to make time for, or a belief that you only shared with your closest confidants. Spirituality was the natural way of being at the time.<sup>3</sup> And for the average person in the medieval period, fairy belief was widespread and deeply ingrained in the vernacular culture, with Christianity, in its Catholic iteration, also dominating almost all aspects of medieval life. So much so, that vernacular beliefs, which included but were not

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<sup>1</sup> S. Mackian, *Everyday Spirituality, Social and Spatial Worlds of Enchantment*, Palgrave MacMillan, 2012

<sup>2</sup> A. de Saint-Exupery, *The Little Prince*, 1943

<sup>3</sup> D. Purkiss, *Troublesome Things*, 2000, p.52

limited to fairy belief, did their best to compromise towards the domination of the Church, introducing, for example, references in fairy lore to Christian tenets.<sup>4</sup> And in some respects, it can be said that vernacular fairy belief and Christian belief, perhaps uneasily, lived side by side for the centuries of the medieval period. The vernacular side for its part showed perhaps a more flexible face than the Church did, who often pronounced against fairy belief, awarded penances to those who would confess belief in fairies, and demonstrated power over fairy beings, whom it classed as demons.<sup>5</sup> However, implicitly, the medieval Church did not succeed in proscribing fairy belief altogether. It did not, at that time at least, torture, burn or hang the believers in fairies. In fact, fairy believers were perhaps seen as rather silly but harmless. One penance for fairy belief was ten days on bread and water.<sup>6</sup> No-one really explains what happened after the ten days were up, though it is assumed that the penance either cured the belief, or at least cured the believer from confessing their belief out loud ever again. Those who professed to have seen visions of fairyland could simply raise the Host or speak the name of Jesus Christ, and the vision would either vanish or be revealed as a glamour.<sup>7</sup> It was much later, in the Early Modern Period, that things got darker for fairy belief, with some confessions of accused witches containing references to fairy familiars that helped to send them to their often gory ends.<sup>8</sup> But, as has been documented previously in this thesis, the nineteenth and twentieth centuries saw a change in fairy belief, most likely influenced by the Victorian obsession with the supernatural,<sup>9</sup> the growth of Spiritualism and most importantly for this topic, Theosophy.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> R. F. Green, *op cit.*, p.2

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, p.11

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, p.15

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, p.16

<sup>8</sup> E. Wilby, *Cunning Folk and Familiar Spirits*, 2005, *op. cit.*, p.56-57

<sup>9</sup> C. Silver, *Strange and Secret Peoples*, 1999, *op. cit.*, p.3

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, p.54

## Spirituality in the Modern World

Humans have had and, arguably, continue to have a strong reliance on the supernatural in their belief systems. Alister Hardy states that religious belief and experience are a fundamental part of human biology. His first two books on the topic of religion and biology are the transcripts from his *Gifford Lectures* (founded by Adam, Lord Gifford in the 1880s to investigate and promote studies in Natural Theology) in 1965 and 1966. In these lectures, Hardy defines Natural Theology as ‘deriving empirically from the study of nature, man and history,’<sup>11</sup> and is committed to upholding it as a branch of science like psychology. He argues against the rhetoric of eminent contemporary biologists like Julian Huxley, who believed ‘once we have rid ourselves of this doctrine of Divine Power, we can get busy with the real task of dealing with our inner forces.’<sup>12</sup> Hardy feels that while this thought might represent much of twentieth century understanding of the human psyche, he disagrees, believing in human ‘extra sensory contact with a divine power, greater than, and which lies beyond, the individual self.’<sup>13</sup> He also discusses the fact that ‘God is a very real and important [concept] to a large number of individual members of our species ... [and] has also some fundamental biological connections.’<sup>14</sup> He is not advocating God as an ‘anthropomorphic’ deity, which would doubtless be a stretch for even the most sympathetic biologist, but rather an ‘extra-sensory power greater than the human self,’ and that if we link God to the biological system, we can create a ‘truer biology’.<sup>15</sup>

Both Hardy and David Hay speak of the sources of religion and evidence of sacred presence as going far back, beyond the Palaeolithic and even beyond primitive man.<sup>16</sup> Hardy also argues that because of the strong links between culture and religion for much of recorded history, ‘our civilisation has been built upon a spiritual interpretation of the world’, and that, in particular,

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<sup>11</sup> A. Hardy, *The Living Stream*, op. cit., p.11

<sup>12</sup> Ibid., p.15

<sup>13</sup> Ibid., p.16

<sup>14</sup> A. Hardy, *The Biology of God*, (London: Jonathan Cape, 1975) p.15

<sup>15</sup> A. Hardy, *The Divine Flame*, (London: Collins, 1966), p.7

<sup>16</sup> David Hay, *Something There, The Biology of the Human Spirit*, 2006, p.26

‘the whole history of science has been a direct search for God ... well into the eighteenth century’.<sup>17</sup> Throughout history, Hay later argues, religion is pervasive yet constantly called into question. People came to mistrust religions, but religious experience carried on.<sup>18</sup> Hardy sees religion as the ‘basic pre-occupation of man.’ He believes that true biology cannot ignore this and that our civilisation may be affected if we neglect it.<sup>19</sup> While Hay welcomes the Enlightenment as the cause of ‘freedom of the mind’, he further argues that ‘its downside is that it ignores or rejects our spiritual nature.’<sup>20</sup> This rejection is then compounded by the likes of Marx and Freud, who contributed to a mood in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, where religious experience became ‘less plausible.’<sup>21</sup> The crisis in religious institutions that has continued into the twenty-first century, caused a loss of social cohesion throughout the world, Hay asserts, and he is thankful for and also contributed heavily to, in the end, the resurgence of the scientific study of religious experience from the 1960s onwards which shows our spiritual nature to be real.<sup>22</sup>

Hardy is motivated in his Gifford lectures, and his later works, by a desire to unite science and natural history under the umbrella of Natural Theology. There is a biological significance in the experience of the divine. The feeling towards divinity is as much a part of biology as is ‘affection,’ for example. Just like consciousness and awareness, it is mysterious, but it should not be ignored just because we cannot see how it fits into the system.<sup>23</sup> One of the biggest stumbling blocks to understanding, Hardy argues, is the lack of open mindedness on behalf of the scientific community, and its assumption that religion is merely a mythology, and religious observance and experience, a product of ignorance or an illusion. If we recognise at first that

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<sup>17</sup> A. Hardy, *The Biology of God*, op. cit., pp.13-23

<sup>18</sup> D. Hay, *Exploring Inner Space*, (London: Penguin, 1982), p.1-24

<sup>19</sup> A. Hardy, *The Biology of God*, op. cit., p.24-35

<sup>20</sup> D. Hay, *Something There*, (London: Darton, Longman and Todd, 2006), p.6

<sup>21</sup> Ibid., p.28-29

<sup>22</sup> D. Hay, *Exploring Inner Space*, op. cit., p.29-39

<sup>23</sup> A. Hardy, *The Biology of God*, op. cit., p.70

we do not fully understand consciousness and/or the mind/body relationship, we should examine both religious experience and ESP without these dogmatic scientific prejudices. We cannot ignore man's religious and spiritual experiences because they throw a light on the nature of living things.<sup>24</sup> To this end, Hardy advocated 'modern social surveying' methods to explore the nature and frequency of reports of religious experience in the UK and established the Religious Experience Research Unit (RERU) for that purpose.<sup>25</sup> In this way, he provides the environment and framework for a scientific method of research into religious experience. Hardy states that he is not aiming for an understanding of religion per se, but of making 'an objective, systematic study of the written records of religious experience.'<sup>26</sup> This is in keeping with his desire expressed in earlier works, not to embark on a psychological interpretation of religious experience.<sup>27</sup> Overall, the research focuses on the nature of spirituality according to those who experience it, regardless of religious or spiritual background, which is also what this thesis will do.

David Hay believes, as Hardy believed, that spirituality 'is prior to religion and is a built-in biologically structured dimension of the lives of all members of the human species.'<sup>28</sup> That spirituality is the creator of religion and belief, and not vice versa, makes the following statistics all the more credible. In Hay's study, and later, also in Linda Woodhead's work,<sup>29</sup> the decline of religious observance and affiliation (i.e. churchgoing), according to Hay, from 1851 to 1998 as going from 50% to 7.5% seems dire, and a rather bald triumph for the Age of Enlightenment thinking, however, when put together with a 1987 Gallup poll on spiritual experience, where 48% of respondents were personally aware of it in their lives, shows something much more interesting about the nature of spirituality and belief. According to Hay, though church

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<sup>24</sup> A. Hardy, *The Divine Flame*, op. cit., p.176

<sup>25</sup> D. Hay, *Exploring Inner Space*, op. cit., p.81

<sup>26</sup> A. Hardy, *The Biology of God*, op. cit., p.13

<sup>27</sup> Ibid., p.14

<sup>28</sup> D. Hay, *Something There*, p. 49

<sup>29</sup> Heelas, Paul; Woodhead, Linda (2005). *The Spiritual Revolution: Why Religion is Giving Way to Spirituality*. Religion and Spirituality in the Modern World. Oxford, England: Blackwell Publishers, p.x-xii

attendance had dropped to 20% by the year 2000, over 60% of respondents were affirming spiritual experience in their lives.<sup>30</sup> While these data are of a broad and simplistic nature, they do help to demonstrate the importance of personal spirituality regardless of how that spirituality is directed. It further shows that spirituality is being considered in different manifestations, moving away from mainstream and traditional observance to a more personalised and individual set of beliefs.<sup>31</sup> What is definitely to be drawn from them is that atheism is not, on the whole, replacing religious observance.<sup>32</sup> Fairy belief is different and also more fragmented, less organised than an established religious faith, however, it has been sustained throughout history, is manifest in the culture, through art, literature, music, etc., and continues to evolve, shape and be shaped by attitudes towards belief and spirituality. In the same way that Hardy, Hay and Hunt embarked on surveys of religious experience, folklorists and writers have recorded and collected peoples' experiences of fairies and fairy like encounters, with the Fairy Investigation Society predominantly, though others also continued the practice, collecting several hundred accounts during the twentieth century, largely all now contained in Marjorie Johnson's book of 2014, *Seeing Fairies*. Simon Young, who revived the Fairy Investigation Society in the late twentieth century, publishing Johnson's book, and then instigating his own online survey of fairy experience, has now collected over one thousand accounts from across the world, but largely from English speaking countries.<sup>33</sup> However, and this has been addressed in earlier chapters, most of the encounters recorded in these documents are usually one offs. Some of them, it is true, seem to spark a return to spirituality in the participant, or to confirm beliefs that have long been held. They do not, on the whole, construct a spirituality of their own. Fairy spirituality seems to have come down a different path, with encounters supporting the belief, but not originating it. Current observations would

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<sup>30</sup> D. Hay, op. cit. p. 7-8

<sup>31</sup> P. Heelas, L. Woodhead, op. cit., p.2-3

<sup>32</sup> World Values Survey, The Policy Institute, Kings College, London, 2023

<sup>33</sup> S. Young, The Fairy Census Vol. 1 (2014), Vol. 2 (2024), op.cit., p.9

suggest that there is a difference, with some overlaps, to be sure, between fairy belief and fairy spirituality.

The experiences recorded by the RERU and examined in Hay's work occur both in times of great happiness, and also in times of great sadness and even grief and mental illness. Hay believes that 'there has been no great change in the frequency with which people encounter a spiritual dimension in their lives,' however, what has altered, he notes, is 'they have the social permission for such experience.'<sup>34</sup> And this has expanded in the twenty first century too, where there is less tolerance for a scornful, prejudicial mindset, in favour, generally speaking, of a respectful and sometimes curious approach to people of faith, belief and spirituality. Hay was saying this in the late twentieth century, that 'there is an accelerating sense of disjunction between institution and personal experience right across the western world,'<sup>35</sup> and this is certainly borne out in general appearances and does not have to be a bad thing. There is a move from a group or community expression of a faith or belief to an increasingly personal and individual 'tailoring' of spirituality, yes, loosely based on some traditions and mainstream religions, and also moving further away into neo-pagan, wellbeing and mindfulness ideologies, conspiracy theories, Forteanism, and even popular culture movements like Jedi. This also includes fairy belief. Hay, furthermore, calls into question the language we use when describing a spiritual experience: 'does our language in a sense construct the experience we are describing or is there some more fundamental preverbal awareness underlying the description?'<sup>36</sup> This is interesting when examining the way, a person talks or writes about their spiritual encounter. As we only have language to describe any event, I would say that in terms of researching encounters, language is a fundamental part of it, as it shows the influence of the participants' personal, cultural influences. But Hay seems to disagree. His (and Hardy's)

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<sup>34</sup> D. Hay, *op. cit.*, p.3

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*, p.188

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*, p.4-5

arguments in favour of a biological impetus to spirituality certainly imply an ‘underlying awareness,’ but how else is one to express that except through language? However, Hay believes that if we only equate religious experience to language, we limit it as ‘extreme subjectivity.’<sup>37</sup> He draws attention to the notion of a ‘common core versus common context’ argument.<sup>38</sup> The idea that ‘all religions arise as responses to the same experiential core’<sup>39</sup> has attracted criticism as being ‘implausible’ when studying in detail certain religions, as they are often contradictory ‘at a logical level.’<sup>40</sup> On the other hand, the idea that metaphors construct meaning is prevalent today.<sup>41</sup> But while there is an extensive range of metaphorical descriptions ‘in association with what are certainly experiences common to every human being,’ Hay disagrees with the common core principle, arguing that people are religious not just because of personal experience but also because ‘spiritual awareness [can be construed] as logically distinct from religion, and as the biological context in which religion can arise but does not necessarily do so, rather than the common core of religion.’ He calls this ‘common context.’<sup>42</sup> Although this is a chapter on fairy spirituality, fairy encounters might not be, in themselves, the result of a spiritual experience, but their manifestation, Hay might argue, comes from this intrinsic core for spirituality, and is then the subjective choice of the individual. What Hay wants to get across however is, it is the biological impetus for religious and spiritual belief and experience that is at the heart of belief and experience, and not the belief and experience that drives it. Fairy belief as in religious belief is the manifestation of this biological impetus.<sup>43</sup>

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<sup>37</sup> *ibid.* p.43

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.* pp. 42 - 44

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*, p.45

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*, p.45

<sup>41</sup> G. Lakoff, M. Johnson, *Metaphors We Live by*, 1980, p.4-7

<sup>42</sup> D. Hay, *op.cit.*, p.46

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid.*, p.46



Hay and Hunt's research into people in Nottingham who have no affiliation to organised religion but who nonetheless claim to have spiritual or religious experiences, reinforces the idea that spiritual awareness is a necessary part of human biology. This is in order to distinguish between people who have been coached and assimilated into a religious practice and vernacular, and might therefore not convincingly express their actual, personal spiritual experience. Hay and Hunt want 'ordinary people.'<sup>44</sup> They continue with Hardy's model, that spiritual experience is a biological impetus, and collecting and analysing the spiritual experience of people separately from religion and the restrictions of a religious experience. A difficulty nowadays with this approach is that traditional religious structures and language have found their way into neo-pagan and so called 'secular' spirituality and therefore imply that the clear pool of 'ordinary' spiritual experience could have been muddled by this. How to get at an understanding of spiritual experiences by people who do not believe in them could be a difficult enterprise. If you have a supernatural encounter, do you have it because you believe they are possible? If you do not believe in it, what do you ascribe it to? Nevertheless, by laying down biological and evolutionary foundations for spirituality and spiritual/supernatural encounters, and disassociating them from religious practice, Hardy, Hay and Hunt have offered an alternative path for research into spiritual encounters that does not depend upon theories of religion, but on theories of human experience. This is good news for those researchers who recognise that fairy belief is a manifestation of the human propensity for spirituality and supernatural experience, alongside religious belief. Religion then moves from being a sometimes-limiting foundational idea, to an important but not superior expression of human experience.

Before moving onto the place that fairy belief occupies in vernacular spirituality, it is important just to pause at the door of subjective spirituality as defined by Paul Heelas and Linda

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<sup>44</sup> *ibid* p. 54

Woodhead.<sup>45</sup> In the process of researching the context for fairy belief, I have become increasingly aware that fairy belief is less an active singular kind of spirituality (except for the small number of pagans who specifically follow a fairy spiritual path)<sup>46</sup> than a manifestation of spirituality in general, in the sense that having an unlooked for supernatural encounter indicates there is a human propensity to supernatural experiences, as Hardy, Hay and Hunt have postulated, regardless as to what form that supernatural experience took. Therefore, I'm not sure how relevant modern ideas of subjective spirituality are in contextualising the prevalence of fairy belief. Fairy belief is not a modern belief. A glance at any of the numerous texts on fairies will demonstrate from the start that fairy belief is as old as records have been kept, probably much older assuming its existence in pre-literate ages. Fairy belief has stubbornly hung on through history and has risen to the surface many times in many guises. It continues to be perpetuated through the arts, through popular culture, through folklore collection and through academic study. But what is modern is how fairy belief is being consolidated into a branch of New Age spiritual practice, intrinsic to neo-pagan goddess worship but also as a form of worship and ritual on its own terms. It is this latter that is perhaps the modern part of fairy belief and is tied to the notion of subjective spirituality that continues to grow, in Western societies at least. And within that niche sphere of fairy worship are the fairy gatekeepers. I find myself observing the fairy practitioners, with a not uncritical eye, in the way that they have moulded fairy belief into a quasi-religious business enterprise, at the centre of which is consumerism (though it is fair to say that this is also true of the very many other branches of New Age paganism, and indeed mainstream religion). The meditations, fayres, festivals, readings, seminars, workshops, conferences, costumes, cards, jewellery, perfumes, incenses, knick-knacks, books and magazines, etc., that are generated by modern fairy

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<sup>45</sup> P. Hellas, L. Woodhead, *The Spiritual Revolution: Why Religion is Giving Way to Spirituality* (Religion and Spirituality in the Modern World), op. cit., p.2-3

spirituality alone is huge and it is worth mentioning here in order to clarify where the study of fairy encounters fits in as it is not a spiritual practice more than a manifestation of spirituality.

The fairy encounter data that has been collected over at least three centuries, tell us therefore, very little about the rise in subjective spirituality. Rather it is the fact that I and many others are interested in personal supernatural encounters which supports it. Counterintuitively, the prevalence of fairy encounters over the last fifty years seems to reinforce not a subjective, individual spirituality, but a common and shared spiritual experience, given the similarities of the beings encountered and the descriptions given by the participants. Each experience may have been unique to the observer, in multiple ways, but each experience also contributes to the vast pool of largely similar fairy encounters had every day by hundreds of people. What has changed (in the West at least) in terms of religious belief and observance is the freedom and ability to choose your own 'pick and mix' spirituality and belief. But this thesis is not directly concerned with a modern take on spirituality, except in the observation that there are now people who refer to themselves as fairy worshippers, and the fact that neither their souls, nor their lives will be forfeit because of this. The fact that people are encountering fairies now, as they had in the past, means very little to most people. The interesting fact about fairy encounters is not that they are happening, but that the fact that they are happening is unsurprising. We are at the point in the history of belief where all beliefs and none are unsurprising. And that is perhaps the true culmination of subjective spirituality. However, the starting point for this research can be found in Linda Woodhead's papers on *The Gods of Spirituality*, and *the Five Concepts of Religion*. The perspective of looking closely into the nature and personality of fairies and fairy-like beings in the second part of this thesis stems from Woodhead's observation that sometimes, Sociology tends to look at everything in detail but the central element.<sup>47</sup> And my argument in favour of the relevance of fairy belief in the field of

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<sup>47</sup> L. Woodhead, *The Gods of Spirituality*, 2019., p.1

Religious Studies comes from Woodhead's *Five Concepts of Religion* which provides an inclusive model for research in this field. An investigation into the nature and personality of fairies and fairy-like beings falls into at least three of her categories:

- *Culture*, in the ancient bedrock of British folklore as well as other ancient records, and its perpetuation through history via the arts, literature, music and popular culture.
- *Relationship*, as the nature of fairies is related through the experience of a human participant,
- *Practice*, the forms of discipleship and worship are tailored by an understanding of the fairy or fairy-like being. What it likes and what it does not plays a huge part in the effectiveness of its power.<sup>48</sup>

So, whilst it cannot be said that the movement towards subjective spirituality is responsible for modern fairy encounters, it is in the evolving nature of spirituality, and the freedoms the modern age confers upon it, and the individualisms of choice that it allows that can also give some context to them. But these encounters are just some of the many manifestations of the nature of human spirituality.

It might be a shock to discover that the option to record religious observance as 'other' and then to write in one's own answer, was only added to the UK Census in 2001. Prior to this date, the choices had been between the five main world religions (Hinduism, Buddhism, Judaism, Christianity and Islam) and atheist. And it is important to note that it is only two censuses ago, at the birth of the new millennium, even though we seem to have been discussing the phenomenon of 'spiritual, not religious' for most of the twentieth century.<sup>49</sup> In fact, nearly 0.8% of the population listed their religion as 'Jedi' that year, mostly as a protest at organised religion, though some may have meant it literally.<sup>50</sup> It has been argued that the figures showing the

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<sup>48</sup> L. Woodhead (2011): *Five concepts of religion* op. cit., pp.121-140

<sup>49</sup> Yale University Publications in Anthropology, 1960, Issues 57 – 65,

<sup>50</sup> Porter, Jennifer. (2006). 'I am a Jedi:' Star Wars Fandom, Religious Belief and the 2001 Census, p.95-112

declining popularity of church attendance (which obviously reached an all-time low during the lockdowns of 2020 and 2021, and still has not caught up with its 2019 figures) is confirmation of the secularisation of the UK. Taken as read, church attendance has been declining for a long time, though 2024 figures are showing a slight rise. Many observers take this to mean that the UK has become a more secular country.<sup>51</sup> But they miss the point. While it is true that the Anglican Church has experienced a decline in attendance in recent years, people are not marching off towards atheism and materialism in their droves. Quite the contrary. 27% (almost a third) of UK citizens and around one fifth of US citizens, class themselves as ‘spiritual, not religious.’<sup>52</sup> Clearly this means that while churches may have to close down or amalgamate, vicars and deacons may be made redundant and church buildings may be sold off to the property developers, the void of church attendance has been filled with the many new and different spiritualities on offer. Some define themselves as ‘secular spiritualities,’ meaning that they still reject belief in deities, but recognise the need for a spiritual dimension to human characteristics, such as meditation, wellbeing and mindfulness for example. And while some commentators may take the option of ‘no religion’ to mean no belief system or spirituality, some people are interpreting it as ‘no established religious affiliation,’ which is quite different and could be populated with people of a strong spirituality of many kinds. The number of people actively reporting as ‘Atheist’ in England and Wales, is a mere fourteen thousand.<sup>53</sup> Thirty-two thousand people choose ‘Agnostic’, which can also be a problematic definition of belief often because agnosticism could be interpreted as ‘not sure’ rather than ‘no belief’ so that figure too may contain people who consider themselves ‘spiritual, not religious’, ‘religious but not practising’ as well as ‘no belief’. Only ten thousand people record themselves as Humanist,

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<sup>51</sup> Humanists UK, Non-religious Surge:37% tick ‘No Religion’ in 2021 Census, 2022

<sup>52</sup> T. de Castella, Spiritual, but not religious, BBC News Magazine, 2013

<sup>53</sup> Office for National Statistics, 2023

though that number is based on membership of the Humanist Society and does not include those who consider themselves humanist with a small ‘h’ so this figure may rise.<sup>54 55</sup>

So, belief in some kind of spirituality, religious or not, seems to be thriving. There are many definitions of the notion of ‘belief’ but in general, it can be defined as, ‘the attitude we have, roughly, whenever we take something to be the case or regard it as true.’<sup>56</sup> When talking about knowledge, Duncan Pritchard argues that in order for us to possess knowledge, we need belief and truth, as, ‘just about every epistemologist agrees that a prerequisite for possessing knowledge is that one has a belief in the relevant proposition, and that that belief must be true.’<sup>57</sup> This definition can become challenging when the belief we are referring to is in the spiritual. Spirituality seems to be one of those things where, if you try to define it, it diminishes somewhat. It is often used nowadays in opposition or contrast to religion, which Vincett and Woodhead highlight.<sup>58</sup> An opposing attitude to mainstream religion is nothing new, as is the embracing of the modern notion of spirituality as more authentic, personal and, by adoption, countercultural.<sup>59</sup> What is perhaps more interesting is the velocity with which Vincett and Woodhead’s meaning of spirituality has changed, from a way of describing one’s devotion to the mystical dimension of one’s (usually mainstream) religious observance, to an umbrella term for all the offerings of non-traditional religious practices.<sup>60</sup> As Vincett and Woodhead argue, ‘spirituality positions itself as preferable to religion and more in tune with key modern values – and thereby positioning religion as inferior.’<sup>61</sup> Neither ‘spirituality’ nor ‘religion’ are being used according to their traditional definitions here, and what Vincett and Woodhead demonstrate is the wholesale acceptance of their modern terms in mainstream culture. Say, ‘spirituality’

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<sup>54</sup> Office of National Statistics, op.cit.

<sup>55</sup> Humanists, UK, Setting the Record Straight on Census 2021, 2022

<sup>56</sup> Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy, 2006

<sup>57</sup> Pritchard, Duncan. *What Is This Thing Called Knowledge*, Taylor & Francis Group, 2018, p.19

<sup>58</sup> G. Vincett and L. Woodhead, *Spirituality*, in *Religions in the Modern World*, 2001, p.32

<sup>59</sup> Ibid., p.321

<sup>60</sup> Ibid., p.322

<sup>61</sup> Ibid., p.323

nowadays, and it conjures all manner of eclecticism: crystals, chakras, meditation, Wicca, prayer, prophecy, speaking in tongues, ritual, wellbeing, mindfulness, to name but a few. What was once marginalised and maligned has to some extent become mainstream, and this can be borne out by the popularity in recent years, of wellbeing and mindfulness practices.<sup>62</sup> We see ‘spiritual’ language overflowing into more secular areas. Wellbeing terminology is cropping up in marketing campaigns for cosmetics, furniture, holidays and even cars. For example, L’Oreal, “because you’re worth it”, Dove, “real beauty”, Clinique, “custom fit skincare solutions”, IKEA and Samsung both use “the heart of your home”, LG, “life is good in the kitchen”, Airbnb, “belong anywhere”, Club Med, “where happiness means the world”, Honda, “the power of dreams”, BMW, “sheer driving pleasure”, Hyundai, “new thinking, new possibilities.” Wellbeing is encouraged in schools, universities, other institutions, like Eton College, “May Eton flourish,” St Peter’s School, York, “Living and Learning together,” Bingley Grammar School, West Yorkshire, “Belong, grow, succeed.” So, while religion as an institution may have been reduced to a ‘husk,’ spirituality is rapidly becoming the unlikely flagship for a personalised spirituality, and, perhaps inevitably, a spiritual capitalism, that, like the medieval monks of old, pedals the merchandise of spirituality to a consumerist society. The aforementioned semantic change in meaning of the words ‘religion’ and ‘spirituality’ is just a happy by-product.

From a more traditional perspective, we can think of spirituality in terms of an emotional engagement with another dimension of ourselves, our spirit or soul, and with another dimension of the cosmos, with spiritual beings and experiences that are not conducted in the material world. Paul Heelas and others define spirituality as something that ‘refers to an individual’s inner life, personal beliefs, and practices that connect them to something greater than themselves. It often involves seeking meaning, purpose, and transcendence beyond the

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<sup>62</sup> K. Birtwell, et al, *An Exploration of Formal and Informal Mindfulness Practice and Associations with Wellbeing*, 2019, p.89-99

material world.’<sup>63</sup> Alister Hardy, as we have seen, characterises spirituality as the fact that ‘spiritual awareness was common to us all regardless of race, age or religious belief and was of evolutionary value.’<sup>64</sup> His focus was more on the evolutionary aspect than in coining a definition of spirituality, but that he sees it as an intrinsic part of who we are as humans highlights how important it is as an aspect of our nature and culture, and that definitions of it can often be taken for granted or left alone. C. S. Lewis seems to reinforce this when he argues that one cannot really fully define spirituality, and that his ‘spirituality was grounded in the idea that there exists a universal moral law that transcends cultural boundaries and points to a higher reality.’<sup>65</sup>

In the many kinds of spirituality on offer in the world, some of them have a supernatural power at the centre of them, be it a god, spirit guides, ancestors or spiritual beings. And in recent years, while traditional religious observance continues to decline, spirituality has continued to grow, as people move away from a ‘life-as’ religion, a classical philosophy and religious concept found in many mainstream religious practices, including Stoicism, Buddhism, etc., which encourage believers to live in the fullness of their religious belief, to a ‘subjective-life’ spirituality, ‘life lived in deep connection with the unique experiences of my self-in-relation.’<sup>66</sup>

Heelas and Woodhead emphasise that traditional religion is giving way to a more individualistic interpretation of religion, belief and spirituality, and that it is certainly no bad thing that some people are taking a more eclectic approach to spirituality, from the many on offer, or signing up to one of the many New Age pathways that have sprung from the New Age movement. Of course, some people have a general, spiritual sense of their own lives that does not require attendance or even much adherence and leave it at that without getting involved in any ritualistic behaviour, but others have found a kind of quasi-religious practice in some of these new pathways and follow them as many before them have followed the more traditional paths.

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<sup>63</sup> Heelas, Paul. (2009). *Spiritualities of Life: New Age Romanticism and Consumptive Capitalism*, p.1-22

<sup>64</sup> *The Alister Hardy Trust: religious & spiritual experiences*. [www.studyspiritualexperiences.org/](http://www.studyspiritualexperiences.org/) accessed April 2024

<sup>65</sup> C. S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity*, 1952, Collins, 2012, p.8-22

<sup>66</sup> P. Heelas and L. Woodhead, *The Spiritual Revolution*, op. cit., p.5-6



Sara Mackian's thesis of 'Everyday Spirituality' probably represents some of the general ideas of modern spirituality discussed here. At the beginning of this chapter, I said that Medieval peoples' spirituality was much more a part of their everyday lives, largely because it was culturally acceptable and even expected, and probably dangerous not to demonstrate belief and spirituality. Of course, only as long as it followed the prescribed Catholic doctrine. Spirituality then, was a part of 'everyday.' However, Mackian's ideas of everyday spirituality in the modern world, seeks to incorporate spirituality into 'everyday' life. It is something that needs restoring, perhaps.<sup>67</sup>

### **Fairy Spirituality**

There are people who have a very strong belief in the existence of fairies and treat them as spiritual, even quasi-religious beings. Some people have clairvoyant powers and are able to conjure fairies to meet with them, or to identify places where fairies can be found. In some cases, there has been created a spiritual practice around the veneration of fairies, often incorporating more recognisable neo-pagan rituals, spells and feasts, with a strong focus on ecology and protection of nature. A very few claim fairy heritage from ancient fairy ancestors.

It bears reminding that there is a difference between the supernatural and the spiritual. The former may appear in the latter, but the latter does not necessarily involve the former. The supernatural can be enjoyed by anyone, without engagement. It is the engagement with the supernatural, through belief and through ritual that brings it into the spiritual world. But the supernatural is largely anything that cannot be explained with material science. Fairies are definitely supernatural in that respect. What makes them spiritual is their active inclusion in the life of the believer, the development of a relationship via communication, ritual, prayer or meditation. The rite of St. Guinefort, for example, popular enough in France in the Middle Ages

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<sup>67</sup> S. Mackian, *Everyday Spirituality: Social and Spatial Worlds of Enchantment*, 2012, op. cit., p.1-4

to encourage a denouncement by the Church in the fifteenth century, illustrates this move from the passive supernatural status of ‘fauns,’<sup>68</sup> to their active behaviour towards humans, and specifically, children. St. Guinefort was a greyhound, mistakenly accused and killed by a knight, who believed the dog, left in charge of his child, had attacked and killed it. It turned out, too late, that the dog had actually protected the child from the attack of a snake, and the blood on the jaws of the dog and in the crib was that of the snake, and the child was found sleeping under the overturned crib, safe and sound. The knight and his lady were filled with remorse, gathered up the remains of the dog and threw them into a well and covered it with stones. Once the story was told abroad, the burial site became a shrine for sick children, and a very specific ritual developed which involved the ‘fauns’ who lived in the wood near the well and were known for stealing human babies and replacing them with their own sickly offspring. Mothers would bring their child to the well and lay it down, say a prayer to St. Guinefort and then walk away, praying to the fauns to restore their own child, ignoring the cries of their abandoned but false infants. When they returned, if the baby hadn’t been picked up by wolves, or died of cold or starvation, but seemed healthy and thriving, it would be taken up as the returned human child thanks to the intercession of the canine Saint. As well as being a good example of Ginsburg’s ‘cultural compromise formation’<sup>69</sup> it also shows the transition of the supernatural entity, the ‘faun’ (and indeed the supernatural Saint) into a spiritual practice.<sup>70</sup>

While Fairy Spirituality does go back several centuries, albeit to a cultural way of life that incorporated it more easily than our industrial and post-industrial customs, it was the Theosophists in the late Victorian and early twentieth centuries, who started looking at fairies as spiritual beings in a much more formal way.<sup>71</sup> As has been demonstrated elsewhere, fairy belief

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<sup>68</sup> ‘Fauns’ in France are as close to our own description of fairies, woodland-centric little people with hairy legs and hooves instead of human limbs and come from classical Greek mythology.

<sup>69</sup> R. F. Green, *op. cit.*, p.109

<sup>70</sup> D. Purkiss, *op. cit.*, p.53-56

<sup>71</sup> The Fairy Investigation Society, <https://www.fairyist.com/what-is-a-fairy/what-is-faeryfairy-spirituality/>, 2013, accessed March 2024

and spirituality until the nineteenth century, consisted mostly of propitiation rather than veneration, so that the fairies would not cause any harm to humans, as they were often wont to do.

Theosophy is an important offshoot of Spiritualism, and some writers in this tradition began to describe fairies as 'elemental spirits, the power behind the workings of nature'.<sup>72</sup> And while these were not new ideas, they certainly attracted the attention of Theosophical writers, so that this idea of an elemental nature was more closely documented and consolidated, changing some of the ways in which fairies were perceived and understood in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.<sup>73</sup>

Walter Evans Wentz, whose *The Fairy-faith in Celtic Countries* (1911) was one of the foundational works of the original Fairy Investigation Society founded in 1923, joined the Theosophical Society in 1901.<sup>74</sup> His book, right from the title, shows a distinct difference in attitude towards fairies, unsuitably introducing the notion of faith into fairy belief which has clear religious, or at least spiritual connotations. Wentz, in his introduction, also sets up a conflict between 'fairy-faith' and what he sarcastically calls, 'triumphant Christianity', referring to the ancient barrow of Carnac in Brittany, supposedly appropriated from ancient paganism, which is oft the cry of neo-pagans, though without much evidence to their long running conflict.<sup>75</sup> His declaration, however, that 'belief in fairies has the same origin as all religions and mythologies' is a fair assumption, and also a plea to posterity not to degrade fairy belief, as for example his contemporary, novelist E. M. Forster does in *Howard's End*, with Margaret Schlegel's deprecating remark to Mrs Wilcox, that, 'unlike the Greek, England has no true mythology. All we have are witches and fairies.'<sup>76</sup> Wentz continues in his introduction to a definition of the Fairy-

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<sup>72</sup> Fairyist.com, op cit., accessed September 2021

<sup>73</sup> Ibid.,

<sup>74</sup> K. Winkler, *Pilgrim of the clear light*, Dawn fire Books, 1982, p.10

<sup>75</sup> W. Evans Wentz, *The Fairy-faith of the Celtic Countries*, 1911, p.xii-xxiv

<sup>76</sup> E.M. Forster, *Howards End*, 1910.

faith, as ‘that specialised form of belief in a spiritual realm inhabited by spiritual beings which has existed from pre-historic times until now,’<sup>77</sup> which is so general as to include all forms of belief with a supernatural dimension. But interestingly, he goes on to define fairies, as ‘natural and not supernatural, for nothing which exists can be supernatural.’<sup>78</sup> Perhaps this is the point where fairies diverge from the supernatural to the spiritual. Most of Wentz’s introduction though, does set out a hypothesis on the nature of spirituality and mysticism, and a re-definition of ‘Science’ which most general readers would also understand as ‘knowledge of things material and visible’,<sup>79</sup> but which Wentz would like to redefine as ‘a knowing or a knowledge of everything which exists’.<sup>80</sup> He also sets out the ‘method of studying the fairy-faith’ as ‘first of all a folklore study’,<sup>81</sup> but Simon Young also points out that the kind of fairy belief gaining traction because of the popularity of Spiritualism and Theosophy in this early period of the twentieth century, did not find favour with folklorists, as ‘spiritualist fairies’ did not reflect ‘authentic folklore’, and was in fact ignored by no less than renowned folklorist and fairy taxonomist, Katharine Briggs, in one of her many books on fairies, *The Fairies in Tradition and Literature* (2011).<sup>82</sup> But Wentz’s intention, in his book, is not to expect the reader to accept everything about fairy spirituality on spec, but to take the reader with him on ‘an investigation’, and that it should be seen that ‘the beliefs of the people, the legends, and their songs are the source of nearly all literatures, and that their institutions and customs are the origin of those of modern times’.<sup>83</sup> He is probably preaching to the choir, or at least most of his readers will already be persuaded by the idea of the existence of fairies and their spiritual legacy to pick up and read his book, but it is a laudable purpose. At the end of his statement however, he reveals where his heart lies, ‘it is much less

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<sup>77</sup> W. Evan Wentz, op cit., p.xv

<sup>78</sup> Ibid., p.xiii

<sup>79</sup> Ibid., p.xv

<sup>80</sup> Ibid., p.xv

<sup>81</sup> Ibid., p.xvi

<sup>82</sup> Young, Simon. “A History of the Fairy Investigation Society, 1927-1960.” *Folklore*, vol. 124, no. 2, JSTOR, 2013, pp.139–56.

<sup>83</sup> W. Evans Wentz, op. cit. p.11

important to know what scholars think of fairies, than to know what Celtic peoples think of fairies. This is especially true considering the Fairy-Faith as it exists now.<sup>84</sup>

Geoffrey Hodson is one of the most well-known Theosophical writers concerned with fairies. He had clairvoyant experiences from the age of six.<sup>85</sup> He then developed his clairvoyant abilities as a young man, which must have coincided with his discovery of and study with the Theosophical Society.<sup>86</sup> Hodson describes the human spirit as ‘a fragment of Divinity, a concentration of Universal Spirit...a spark in a flame, a drop in an ocean, a microcosm within the macrocosm’.<sup>87</sup> This represents an almost identical concept set out in the ancient Indian Upaniṣads, which influenced some Theosophical thought as well as Spiritualism and mysticism, given the interest in Indian philosophy and mysticism displayed by some of the founding members of the society.<sup>88</sup> And this idea seems to be carried over into Hodson’s experience of fairies. He tends to see them in groups and forms, dancing or flying together in uniform patterns. In his most popular work, *Fairies at Work and Play*, Hodson talks about seeing fairies and all manner of other fairy-like beings, through clairvoyant means, implying that they were not visible to the naked eye, or to people without clairvoyant powers. However, as documented in his book, he toured the north of England in the early 1920s, seeing fairies of different types and in different (largely rural) locations.<sup>89</sup> He goes further, finding ‘an evolving consciousness’ inside a rock in the Lake District in 1922. This consciousness ‘manifests chiefly as formless blotches of colour, a sort of embryo gnome.’<sup>90</sup> Hodson was also party to the Cottingley fairy photographs hoax and spent some time in the company of Elsie Wright and Frances Griffiths in their fairy beck in

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<sup>84</sup> Ibid., p.xvi

<sup>85</sup> W. Keidan, [www.geoffreyhodson.com](http://www.geoffreyhodson.com), 2013, accessed 23/05/2024

<sup>86</sup> The Geoffrey Hodson Story, The Theosophical Order of Service, New Zealand, 1910s, [www.theosophy.world/resource/articles/geoffrey-hodson-story](http://www.theosophy.world/resource/articles/geoffrey-hodson-story), accessed April 2024

<sup>87</sup> G. Hodson, S. Hodson, *Light of the Sanctuary, The Occult Diary of Geoffrey Hodson*, 1988, p.xiv-xv

<sup>88</sup> Sellon, E. B.; Weber, R. (1992). "Theosophy and The Theosophical Society". In Faivre, A.; Needleman, J. (eds.). *Modern Esoteric Spirituality*. New York: Crossroad Publishing Company. pp. 311–29.

<sup>89</sup> G. Hodson, *Fairies at Work and Play*, 1925 p.37

<sup>90</sup> Ibid., p.38

Yorkshire, viewing fairies there. (The Cottingley girls did not like Hodson, they thought him a fake himself and teased him, pointing around the area, saying they could see fairies when they did not).<sup>91</sup> Hodson's experience of fairies appears to be only clairvoyant, that is he saw them with his gift, rather than with the naked eye.<sup>92</sup> But that did not mean that he could see them whenever he wanted to. On his tour, he visited natural places, the areas in which he believed the fairies likely to be and found them there in a similar way to a naturalist who might visit the habitat of a wild animal and if lucky, find it there. It appears then, that his gift was this ability to 'see' the physically unseeable, the elemental spirits whose energy drove the natural areas present in our world. Does this imply that the fairies are in another reality connected by the natural and material objects that appear in our reality? Or are they resident in our reality but not perceivable except by clairvoyant means? Hodson sees fairies in many places, but they do not follow him away. The evidence he documents shows the fairies to be tied to the place in which they are seen. Hodson's examples fall between my own classification of fairy experiences, those which take place accidentally and exogenously, and those which are endogenous. The endogenous experiences seem to have moved on from Hodson's 'in-place' encounters, as we shall see. Hodson's perception of the fairies, in keeping with the tenets of Theosophy, is that of an energetic phenomenon, which 'builds up', for whatever reason (being observed, perhaps), to the point of visibility, in his case, clairvoyant visibility, (and in the case of his interpretation of the Cottingley photographs, to the point of where they can be captured by a photographic plate). He, Gardner and Doyle certainly believed that is what had happened at Cottingley and speculated on the clairvoyant ability of the two cousins.<sup>93</sup> While the girls had initially talked only of seeing the fairies in very general terms, and trying to photograph them, after the visits of

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<sup>91</sup> J. Cooper, *The Case of the Cottingley Fairies*, op. cit., p.87-88

<sup>92</sup> G. Hodson, *Fairies at Work and Play*, 1925, op. cit., p.9

<sup>93</sup> J. Cooper, *The Case of the Cottingley Fairies*, 1998, op. cit., p.83-90

Hodson and Gardner, in one interview, an older Elsie talked of the fairy energy ‘building up,’ a very Theosophical turn of phrase.<sup>94</sup>

Hodson and Edward Gardner seemed to be an important Theosophical double act in the 1920s. Gardner wrote a lengthy introduction in Hodson’s *Fairies at Work and Play*, and he discussed his own part in the publication and dispersal of the Cottingley photographs in his book, *Fairies, a book of real fairies*, published in 1955. Gardner talks about learning the clairvoyant technique, as he had done, and that such a practice was open to anyone.<sup>95</sup> He too saw fairies in the same way that Hodson speaks about, and it is probably around this time that it became popular to experience the fairies in a clairvoyant way. It does also remove the fairies from the material world, where they had previously but rarely been encountered in tales from Sir Walter Scott, or the Brothers Grimm, where anyone could encounter them without any clairvoyant abilities, and perhaps anoints those with clairvoyant powers, as vicars for communicating with them, installing a barrier again between these new, spiritual fairies and the ‘uninitiated’, notwithstanding Gardner’s assertion that anyone can become a clairvoyant. This is a good example of how, both in traditional religion and in new spiritualities, there always has to be a quasi-priesthood of ‘chosen people.’ It is not enough that fairies are anyway rare and generally unseen, they are sequestered as soon as the ‘chosen’ are able to get their golden hands upon them. In some ways, Cottingley both broke these rules and also encouraged them. In the first place, these were working class girls, proving that fairies were not elitist, then when the upper-class Theosophists got involved, the girls have to be admitted into the clairvoyant club, raised up, made special, in order to maintain the purity of the exalted, clairvoyant sphere. Doyle died long before the confessions of fraud and Gardner died in 1969. Hodson died at the start of 1983, having been made aware of the admissions. F. R. Maher supposes that this was too much for the 96 year old, whose reputation over much of the twentieth century had been based on his

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<sup>94</sup> S. Young, *The Cottingley Fairies, A Source Book*, Pwca Books, 2024, p.245

<sup>95</sup> E. L. Gardner, *Fairies: A Book of Real Fairies*, Theosophical Publishing House, 1974, p.13

involvement with the Cottingley photos. He died only three weeks into the start of the year.<sup>96</sup> Maybe the hoax then consolidated the belief that only certain, gifted individuals could truly access the fairy world. Either way, the discovery of the photographs, their confirmation as genuine and then their confirmation as false, consolidates the idea that only the ‘called’ can experience fairies. Cottingley becomes both the hope and the warning of ‘unqualified’ fairy belief.

Some sources say that Sir Arthur Conan Doyle was growing tired of his highly successful and lucrative character, Sherlock Holmes, in favour of the study of the paranormal, as early as the 1880s.<sup>97</sup> It is true that Doyle became more interested in and involved with Spiritualism, and with participating in seances at this time.<sup>98</sup> He even fell out with his friend, the escapologist Harry Houdini, first privately then publicly via newspapers, over Doyle’s support for what Houdini had dedicated 35 years of his adult life exposing, fraudulent mediums.<sup>99</sup> In 1918, Doyle’s essay ‘The New Revelation’ was dedicated to ‘the brave men and women, humble or learned, who have had the moral courage during seventy years to face ridicule or worldly disadvantage in order to testify to an all-important truth.’<sup>100</sup> The ‘all-important truth’ was of course the existence of a spirit world and the ability of some to converse with it. Spiritualism and later Theosophy were undoubtedly indebted to the respect and fame appertaining to their celebrity advocate, and the ravages of war and pandemic set the background for a resurgence in belief amongst the general population, especially in belief in the afterlife.<sup>101</sup> Doyle endorsed the Cottingley photographs, after receiving enhanced copies of the same, doctored by Gardner, and after only a circumspect

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<sup>96</sup> F. R. Maher, *Sir Arthur Conan Doyle and the Secret of the Cottingley Fairies*, Independent Publishers, 2021, p.89

<sup>97</sup> Panek, LeRoy Lad (1987). *An Introduction to the Detective Story*. Bowling Green, OH: Bowling Green State University Popular Press. p. 78.

<sup>98</sup> Ibid.

<sup>99</sup> L. Gardner, *Harry Houdini and Sir Arthur Conan Doyle, a Friendship Split by Spiritualism*, The Guardian Newspaper, 2015

<sup>100</sup> A. Conan Doyle, *The New Revelation*, 1918, p.1

<sup>101</sup> Lockhart, A. (2014). *Religious and Spiritual Mobility in Britain: The Panacea Society and Other Movements in the Twentieth Century*. *Contemporary British History*, 29(2), p.155–178



investigation into their veracity.<sup>102</sup> His writings and those of the other Theosophists show a belief in the truth of the girls, the girls' families and the photographs, largely because of the youth and prettiness of the girls, and also the notion that working class people could not pull the wool over the eyes of their 'betters' without discovery.<sup>103</sup> Doyle died in blissful belief, in 1930, the girls grew up married and moved away from Cottingley, and were not heard from again until the 1960s.<sup>104</sup>

And there were some prominent women writing and practising in the tradition of Theosophy and specifically fairies, in the mid to late twentieth century. Daphne Charters appears in the 1950s as a medium who specifically saw and 'became the friend of' fairies that she saw near her home on 'the edge of a town in England.'<sup>105</sup> She had been drawn to Spiritualism after the death of her husband, Jack, and had successfully conversed with him via a medium at first and then through her own attempts at automatic writing.<sup>106</sup> She went on to contact fairies, aided in her understanding of them with Geoffrey Hodson's book, *Fairies at Work and Play*.<sup>107</sup> Charters' experience of the fairies continues in the tradition of Hodson's clairvoyant encounters of the 1920s, and she uses clairvoyance to speak to them every day. Though she also admits that fairies do not have the capacity to maintain a conversation.<sup>108</sup> Dora Van Gelder wrote her book, *The Real World of Fairies*, in 1977, after a lifetime dedicated to Theosophy and healing. She was made President of the Theosophical Society in America, in 1975. She claimed to have had many encounters with fairies, on a clairvoyant level, since her childhood and young adulthood, in Java, and Sydney, Australia.<sup>109</sup> She married an American and moved to Chicago in the United

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<sup>102</sup> J. Cooper, *The Case of the Cottingley Fairies*, op.cit., pp.38-49

<sup>103</sup> M. Dickson, *Fairy Fraud*, in *The Cottingley Fairy Photographs: New Approaches to Fairies, Fakes and Folklore*, 2024, pp.251-266

<sup>104</sup> F. R. Maher, op. cit., p.80

<sup>105</sup> D. Charters, M. Pilarski, *Forty years with the fairies: The collected Manuscripts of Dorothy Charters*, 2008, pp. i-iii

<sup>106</sup> D. Charters, *A True Fairy Tale*, 1956, p.viii

<sup>107</sup> *Ibid.*, p.x

<sup>108</sup> *Ibid.*, p.xiv-xv

<sup>109</sup> Kirsten van Gelder, Frank Chesley, *A Most Unusual Life. Dora Van Gelder Kunz: Clairvoyant, Theosophist, Healer*, Theosophical Publishing House, 2015, [www.theosophical.org/publications/quest-magazine/a-most-unusual-life-dora-van-gelder-kunz-clairvoyant-theosophist-healer](http://www.theosophical.org/publications/quest-magazine/a-most-unusual-life-dora-van-gelder-kunz-clairvoyant-theosophist-healer) accessed May 2024

States, and continued her connection with the Theosophical world, focusing on clairvoyant identification of diseases and healing in particular. It seems that her communication with fairies became connected to environmental issues, which were beginning to alarm people by the 1980s. She encouraged more engagement with 'devas' who she saw as the drivers of the natural world, as many Theosophists before her had claimed.<sup>110</sup>

### **Radical Faeries**

A study of the history of fairy spirituality would not be complete without a reference to the various counterculture movements from the sixties and seventies in the USA. This niche movement, started by a group of male gay rights activists in the 1970s, namely the activists Harry Hay, also founder of the Mattachine Society, a 1950s gay rights organisation, Mitch Walker, the youngest of the group, and also a Jungian philosopher, Don Kilhefner whom, now in his eighties, still campaigns on behalf of the LGBTQ community, and John Burnside, a scientist and inventor (he invented the teleidoscope, a kind of 'dark field kaleidoscope'). Maybe, these people and others like them, were perhaps more concerned with taking back the homophobic slur 'fairy' a term used to denigrate gay men for over a hundred years, in much the same way that black rights activists tried to re-appropriate the N word, with varying levels of success. But while the concern of the group was to promote gay rights and equalities, it also, like many countercultural groups at the time, and in the present, sought to establish a spiritual dimension to its cause. The very literal supernatural alternative meaning of the word 'faery' (the choice of the pseudo Celtic spelling of the word adds to the mystique and prestige of fairy belief) was, it seems the logical step to take in creating a quasi-spiritual practice alongside the political activism, which, in itself is an interesting facet of some countercultural movements. There is little doubt that some political movements take on a quasi-religious aspect, especially with a popular and charismatic leader, and perhaps, for most followers, which is enough, the spiritual

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<sup>110</sup> K. van Gelder, F. Chesley, op. cit.

aspect comes from the fervour of a deeply held ideology and an attractive personality at the helm. A specific, explicit spiritual dimension is not really necessary, is it? To distinguish a movement from the others though, by cultivating a spiritual practice, and an enchanted one to boot could appear as attractive as the activism, or the spiritual practice on their own. At any rate, the Radical Faeries, while perhaps not a hugely influential movement, certainly caught the imagination of its followers and supporters which continues today, and either introduced, or at least helped promote the idea that political and cultural activism also needed a spiritual dimension to give it, what, credibility? Depth? This paradigm can also be found in eco-activism, and also trans and queer rights movements, who have specifically adopted unicorns and mermaids as the symbols of their quest for equality and acceptance. The pejorative epithet 'fairy,' designed to slur gay men because of its hyperfeminine associations and misogynistic connotations – so much of homophobia is rooted in misogyny after all – is transformed, by its association with centuries of folklore, with magic, enchantment, non-conformity, and radicality. It is perhaps thanks to these activists, and groups like them, that their legacy lives on in even greater countercultural movements in the twenty-first century.

### **Fairy Wicca**

Finally, and perhaps the most religious of the spiritual groups, is the relatively new off shoot from traditional Wicca. While the modern iteration of fairy witchcraft or Wicca, the idea of a fairy witch stems from fifteenth and sixteenth century witch trials and fairy tales, conflating the two ideas almost to indistinguishability.

As part of my ethnographic research, I attended the East Sussex Fairy Festival, where I was able to watch a circle consecration in the fairy Wiccan tradition. To be honest, there was very little difference from the traditional Wiccan ceremony. The God and Goddess are substituted with the King and Queen of the fairies, and the elementals called from each of the four directions

remained the same, largely because they have already been identified as fairy like beings in the Wicca tradition, namely Gnomes (Earth, north), Sylphs (synonymous with fairies, governing air and the east), Undines (often translated as merfolk or water sprites governing the west and water). The only anomaly perhaps, are the elemental Salamanders (South and fire), who take the same form as the actual reptile salamanders, anthropomorphised by many pre-enlightenment thinkers and ancients.<sup>111</sup> I have no problem with elemental salamanders being considered as fairy like beings however, as the anthropomorphising of them is one of the major characteristics of fairy like beings, i.e. to resemble or be relatable to humanoids. Once the circle was consecrated in this way, with prayers to the King and Queen of the fairies to be among us, the entertainment, folk music and dancing became the order of the rest of the day. I did not stay long enough to see whether the circle was banished at the end, an important part of any Wiccan ritual. While I do not doubt the authenticity of the participants, the interchangeability from traditional Wicca to fairy Wicca was obvious, and I found it difficult to connect with it when so little of it seemed to offer a genuine fairy Wiccan experience. Perhaps the only difference was, the participants were cosplaying fae. Given the similarities, and given the historical lineage of fairies, which go back at least to Anglo-Saxon times and are even mentioned (if '*campestres*' have been rightly translated as fairies) on British Roman tombstones,<sup>112</sup> I wonder whether fairy Wicca or witchcraft or ritualism came first and inspired traditional Wicca and is not an off shoot of that path. Given the associations and practices, they seem much more in tune with fairy folklore. For example, I have already touched upon the important role of the elementals, and the concern for nature that most Wiccans have, but what else indicates a foundation in fairyology? Wicca is definitely a quasi-religious spiritual practice, which involves regular rituals which follow astronomical events such as solstices, equinoxes, the cycles of the moon and sun. It also incorporates *genii locorum* which can be fairy like or godlike, having attributes or responsibility

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<sup>111</sup> Paracelsus, op. cit.

<sup>112</sup> S. Young, The Campestres: Romano -British Fairies? From *Beachcomber's Bizarre History Blog*, 2015, accessed December 2024

for natural occurrences, like springs, wells, rivers, hills, barrows, mountains and tors. Wiccan ritual also includes offerings from nature, including stones and crystals, charms and spells, and then there is circle dancing, music and singing. So far, Wiccan practice seems to have much more in common with fairy folklore than anything else. In fact, much of pagan associations come from more recent myths, legends, largely reconstructionism of pseudo-paganism that may or may not have foundation in actual pagan rituals of pre-Christian times. There is more of fairy in Wicca than anything else. So when I witnessed a fairy Wiccan circle casting, the only difference being the invocation of the King and Queen of the Fairies (a feudal representation of mythology, largely stemming from the Middle Ages), it is Wicca that would be the off shoot, like angel Wicca, another neo-pagan representation of magical supernatural beings, purloined from ancient scriptures (Angels are probably the oldest recorded supernatural beings, found in Jewish texts, the Vedas and the Quran, for instance).

Fairy spirituality then, has, like many other spiritual paths, a ritualistic practice, a veneration and propitiation element, and a set of guidance for living. The central element, that Woodhead deems intrinsic to any belief, and any study of that belief,<sup>113</sup> are a pantheon of diverse creatures which are chimeric, cryptoid, humanoid, ephemeral, with close associations with the natural world, and the ability to transform that world through magical powers. Humans have always been associated with them, and have had the ability to see them, or otherwise experience them, have been the beneficiaries of their magic and the victims of their tricks. Humans have created superstitions to keep them at bay, or to keep them happy and friendly. The modern fairy spirituality advocates for a closer association with fairies and fairy like beings. It encourages a strong regard for preserving nature, healing naturally and in general fostering wellbeing and mindfulness, pushing for a symbiotic relationship with the dominant species of this planet, for the good of all. And this iteration of fairy seems to be very much moving away from the

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<sup>113</sup> L. Woodhead, op. cit., p.1

traditional tricksters. It may also be (as has occurred in Wicca, and Witchcraft) the beginning of a divergence in belief, a fairy culture war, where believers push for the authenticity of their type of fairy. The 'old' folklore fairies become the orthodoxy, and the new fairies on the block, the heretics. Neither scenario particularly enchanting. And fairies inhabit the profane, even though fairy practitioners are trying (and possibly succeeding in some cases) in dragging fairies into the sacred space. If that does not work, however, we know from folklore what penalties fairies will exact from us.







## Chapter Eight

### Fairy Practitioners

Morgan le Fay was not married, but put to school in a nunnery,  
where she became a great mistress of magic."

*Thomas Malory*<sup>1</sup>

"Fairies and Mermaids are very dear to me, as they are guardians of our beautiful planet earth and the oceans! I am related to the poet Walter de la Mare, who is known for his fairy and mermaid poetry. You may have noticed I LOVE faeries, angels, unicorns, mermaids, and all things mystical! This is a far cry from my former life as a BBC News Journalist!"

*Karen Kay*<sup>2</sup>

Humans and fairies have been in contact with each other for centuries, often secretly, especially during the domination of organised religions and the suspicion held by the Church both pre and post reformation of anyone with occult knowledge. But an important development in popular fairy culture is the rise of the fairy practitioner, who stands at the gateway into the magical, enchanted lands of fairy.

Fairy practitioners contact fairies from any location on behalf of themselves and others. They contact the fairies usually through guided meditation or creative visualisation, and even sometimes channelling, though this is rare. These sessions can take place online via zoom calls, in meeting halls or gyms, or house parties. The participants are invited to tune into a mental space described by the fairy practitioner. Sometimes the practitioner sets the theme of the visualisation; some practitioners are more specific than others, working in their particular tradition or path, like connecting with the Cicely Mary Barker Flower Fairies on the one

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<sup>1</sup> T. Malory, *Le Morte D' Arthur*, c.1470

<sup>2</sup> K. Kay, [www.karenkay.co.uk/mediaroom/about](http://www.karenkay.co.uk/mediaroom/about), accessed 21/02/2024

hundredth anniversary of their first publication. Sometimes though, the practitioner will give the participants the choice of what takes place in the visualisation. Once the scene has been set, the fairy beings usually appear, bringing with them a message, an aphorism, or something else for the participant to learn from. These visualisations or meditations are quite different from the exogenous encounters found in the datasets of the *Fairy Census*, and the *Modern Fairy Sightings*, et al. And these endogenous encounters are certainly more controllable than the clairvoyant encounters of noted Theosophists and Spiritualists. They are in the power of the practitioner and the participants in a way that the accidental encounters are not. And while the encounter is taking place in a collective space, each member of that space would be experiencing the event individually and separately.

Here then we see a trend developing where fairies are becoming oracular beings. For fairies to be expressly oracular is a relatively new thing. In the past, people have tended to go to the 'wise' person for advice, with the person then consulting with their fairy helper. In the Early Modern period, this was the common way. The querant may or may not have known how the practitioner was getting their knowledge, probably they thought they were better off not knowing. And perhaps the use of a 'wise' person in those days acted as a protection, initially from the fairies themselves, as this was the time of keeping fairies at bay, but also from the authorities, ready to accuse. Nowadays, there is of course little to no real persecution of neither querant nor practitioner. People can buy oracular cards, books on the fairy faith, they can attend fairy fairs and festivals, online courses, talks and seminars. The worst one might expect is ridicule.

### **A History of Fairy Practitioners**

And, in spite of the current popularity of fairy mediums, fairy practitioners are nothing new. Malory's description of Morgan le Fay, literally Morgan 'the fairy,' is perhaps our earliest written

record of a fairy practitioner in UK folklore.<sup>3</sup> Malory brings her to life quite late in fairy history, at the start of the Early Modern period, but she is also found in almost all the earlier texts relating to the Arthurian legends.<sup>4</sup> Medieval descriptions of fairies tend to be twofold: there are little supernatural beings like more modern fairies in Medieval writings, and they were called ‘elves’ until the late Early Modern period,<sup>5</sup> but it was also common to call (mostly) women with supernatural powers, ‘fays’, in the chivalric tradition.<sup>6</sup> Some of these fays have survived to the present day thanks to the popularity of the Arthurian legends. *Morgan Le Fay* is perhaps being the most popular, then the Lady of the Lake, who is known by many variations of the names *Niniane* and *Viviane*, and *Nimue* the beguiler of Merlin.<sup>7</sup> Of course, it is easy to see how these ‘fays’ are later re-written as witches and given a more demonic disposition, and this may also reflect the conflation applied to fairies and witches in this period.

It is interesting that most of the information we have about historical fairy practitioners comes to us from court documents, or in the writings of those people committed to persecuting them. At the very least, from these documents we know that such people existed. Whether or not they were in league with the Devil goes with the persecution territory. Most of the ‘cunning’ men and women were people with knowledge, experience and skills in healing, or with just a bit more common sense than the rest of the village folk. Of course there were those with a more dishonest agenda. Richard Sugg writes about ‘fairy fraudsters,’ such as Judith Philips in 1594, a vagabond, who convinced a wealthy man that she was the Queen of the Fairies and managed to extort ‘gold and finest linens’ from the benighted man.<sup>8</sup> Sugg also documents ‘a husband and

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<sup>3</sup> Geoffrey of Monmouth, *Vita Merlini*, 1150

<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

<sup>5</sup> R Hutton, *Medieval Fairies* in Lapham’s Quarterly, 2022 accessed 2025

<sup>6</sup> D. Purkiss, *Troublesome Things*, op. cit., p.78-82

<sup>7</sup> The lives of these fairy practitioners are documented in the many accounts of the Arthurian Legends, from the Medieval period to the present day, many of which are cited here.

<sup>8</sup> R. Sugg, *Fairies*, a *Dangerous History*, op. cit., p.68-69

wife team, John and Alice West who in 1613 were convicted of defrauding Thomas Moore and his wife of £80.<sup>9</sup>

## **Fairy Doctors**

Throughout history, the poor had very little recourse to medical assistance and were unlikely to ever be able to afford a medically trained doctor. Sugg gives testimony of the alternative on offer, the Fairy Doctor. Such people, similar to or descended from the village wise people, would attribute their cures to the fairies, which gave such cures a certain cachet amongst the people of the village. Sugg recounts a 'white witch' from Yorkshire in 1677 doing just that.<sup>10</sup> The Teare Family from the Isle of Man, in particular, the eighteenth century herbalist Charles Teare was the most noted, and had a considerable practice on the Island and among the fishermen especially, notoriously superstitious, 'was treated like Christ' because of their success in catches.<sup>11</sup> Diane Purkiss notes that during the persecutions of cunning folk, consorting with fairies seemed to be 'less intimidating and less culpable than the devil...'<sup>12</sup> and they would constantly talk about their meetings with 'a man or woman who has shown them how to scry... heal or see.'<sup>13</sup> And yet, as Purkiss asserts, these traffickings with the fairies did not save them, according to those recorded confessions in witch trials.<sup>14</sup> Bessie Dunlop 1579, does seem to imply that she had no skill at all in magic, for good or evil, it was all told to her by Tom, her fairy familiar. Did she hope that this would save her? For the persecutors, the Church and the Monarchy, it certainly did not, fairies were demons, pure and simple, but it is interesting that such fairy practitioners presented themselves as vessels and not perpetrators.<sup>15</sup> Emma Wilby, writing predominantly about the Early Modern Period, and gaining most of her examples from witch trial notes, gives us an insight

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<sup>9</sup> *ibid.*, p. 70

<sup>10</sup> *ibid.*, p.71

<sup>11</sup> R. Sugg, *op. cit.*, p.75

<sup>12</sup> D. Purkiss, *Troublesome Things*, *op. cit.* p.126

<sup>13</sup> *ibid.* p.127

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, p.127

<sup>15</sup> *ibid.* p.87 - 9

into the working relationship between the fairy practitioner and the fairy familiar. Obviously allowing for the interruption of the relationship by being arrested and tried, many of the relationships between the two were of several years' duration, one practitioner, Anne Cate, maintained her connection for over twenty years.<sup>16</sup> Both witches and fairy practitioners recounted that their familiars lived nearby to them, 'in glass or leather bottles, crystals, baskets, boxes, earthenware pots lined with wool kept under the stairs or by the hearth, under borders of 'green herbs' in the garden and under the roots or in the hollows of trees.'<sup>17</sup> Most of the time, Wilby records, the familiars and fairy practitioners would meet at mutually agreed times, though sometimes the familiars could appear 'unbidden'.<sup>18</sup> Wilby thinks that this was a ploy on the part of the familiar to 'retain their autonomy,' maintaining the idea that the relationship is not a constrained one, and perhaps also to remind the fairy practitioner who had all the power.<sup>19</sup> Some records do show that the practitioner could summon the fairy familiar, for example, Robert Kirk's seer Alexander Hamilton had been given a branch from a fir tree that if he beat it on the ground, 'thryce' the familiar would appear ...'in the likeness of an corbie (a raven), at other times in the shape of a cat, and at other times in the shape of a dog...'<sup>20</sup> Wilby also writes of the formality and intimacy of the relationships between the supernatural entity and the practitioner. As we have already seen, many of these relationships were of long duration, and so, as with any human relationship, a certain familiarity would be bound to occur.<sup>21</sup> Relationships with the fairy courts, including the Fairy King and Queen, remained formal. Some practitioners would treat their familiars in the same way they would treat a pet.<sup>22</sup> Of course, more salacious intimacies were also recorded, largely one would assume to increase the depravity of the crime of witchcraft, where any kind of affection or sexual intimacy would increase the practitioners

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<sup>16</sup> E. Wilby, *Cunning folk and Familiar spirits*, 2005, op. cit.p.77

<sup>17</sup> *ibid.*, p.77

<sup>18</sup> *ibid.*, p.78

<sup>19</sup> *ibid.*, p.78

<sup>20</sup> Emma Wilby quoting from Kirke's *Secret Commonwealth*, 1691, p.78

<sup>21</sup> E. Wilby, op. cit. p.81

<sup>22</sup> *ibid.*, p.82

guilt.<sup>23</sup> Finally, Wilby also notes how some practitioners were required to travel to lonely, probably liminal places, churches and churchyards being favourite, to meet with their familiars, again, the travelling to such places would most likely increase the evidence against the practitioner in the long run.<sup>24</sup> According to Jeremy Harte, 'cunning folk claimed a liminal status between good and bad for themselves and the fairies they consulted.'<sup>25</sup> For example, John Walsh, working in the 1560s, earned his living as a fairy doctor and cunning man. He used the wisdom he gained from working with the fairies to find out who were the witches in his village. He clearly did not rank himself amongst them. He also was able to use his knowledge to locate stolen goods. His description of fairies and collocation with colours was very similar to angel lore, and at this time the lines between religious belief, vernacular belief and belief in evil seem to be very narrow indeed.<sup>26</sup> In the previous chapter, this conflation has been discussed in more detail, with some modern practitioners still opting to call themselves 'fairy witches' or 'fairy Wiccans'.<sup>27</sup> However, generally speaking, most modern practitioners in this area are quite specific in their denotation of fairy. And they would very much want to distinguish themselves from the negative connotations of witchcraft which survive since the witchcraft persecutions of the seventeenth century and beyond. Many practising witches and Wiccans also seek to distance themselves from the traditional demonic representation of their craft. And as has also been previously discussed, 'fairy' in the twentieth century, pretty much means a small, beautiful feminine being, with wings, with a wand, a sweet, childlike aspect and disposition, and always good. And as much as fairy folklorists, historians, and indeed some practitioners take pains to explain how this view is at best a modern one, and at worst a gross misrepresentation, this view of fairies has largely stuck.

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<sup>23</sup> E. Wilby, op. cit., p.83

<sup>24</sup> *ibid.*, p.84

<sup>25</sup> J. Harte, *Fairy Barrows and Cunning Folk*, in C. Houlbrook and S. Young, *Magical Folk*, 2010, op. cit., p.70

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, p.69

<sup>27</sup> The Fairy Investigation Society, What is faery/faery spirituality? [www.fairyist.com](http://www.fairyist.com), 2013, accessed 17/06/2025

## Modern Fairy Practitioners

I will try to represent the current role of fairy practitioners in this chapter. And that will require some straying into the areas of traditional witchcraft and Wiccan territory. Much has been written on both of these huge fields for research, and I will not bring anything new to it. But it is impossible to avoid some mention. I will of course be noting where fairy practice and witchcraft or Wiccan practice overlap or conflate, as this intersection is certainly interesting, from a folklore history point of view at least. I also want to see how both practices have influenced each other. I particularly want to examine the work of three fairy practitioners currently working in this field in the UK: Karen Kay, Claire Casely and Jo Hickey Hall. I will examine the kind of practice they offer, their background specific to fairy belief, their designation of the fairy 'realm' or 'otherworld.' Both Karen Kay and Clare Casely call themselves 'fairy whisperers' and offer their gifts of communicating with the fairies on behalf of other people and themselves.<sup>28</sup> Jo Hickey Hall has had the website '*scarlettothefae.com*' for several years and also hosts the podcast '*Modern Fairy Sightings Podcast*.' Hickey-Hall brings an academic and research perspective to fairy belief, whilst also maintaining her own abilities in spiritual practice. She has trained in Chakra healing since 1996 and the body mirror system of healing, since 2005.<sup>29</sup>

The fairy encounters and experiences that Kay and Casely deal with are very much more benign and positive than the traditional view of fairies. Their fairies are helpful, supportive, and communicative, offering wellbeing advice, peace and blessings. How has this aspect of fairy belief developed? It seems it might be concurrent with the prettification of fairies, the fluttery, beautiful and above all feminine, with wings and a wand, ready to grant wishes. These kinds of fairies, perpetuated through books and toys aimed at children, have been around since the Victorian era at least.<sup>30</sup> The fake Cottingley fairy photographs fit into this type for example,

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<sup>28</sup> C. Casely, [www.faerywhisperer.co.uk](http://www.faerywhisperer.co.uk), accessed 19/02/2024

<sup>29</sup> Jo Hickey-Hall, [www.scarlettothefae.com](http://www.scarlettothefae.com), 2016.

<sup>30</sup> D. Purkiss, op. cit., p.220

having been copied from a contemporary fashion magazine of beautiful, stylised Art Nouveau women.<sup>31</sup> If beautiful fairies occur earlier, it is usually as a glamour, with a malign purpose, in keeping with the general pre-Victorian belief that fairies were close to if not completely demonic.<sup>32</sup> Furthermore, given that Kay and Casely act as mediums for these kinds of fairies, they are endogenous, with which there seems to also come a kind of fairy spirituality. I had begun with the idea that, even as supernatural beings, which fairies may or may not be, they were different from the spiritual creatures like angels and demons, ghosts and spirits. Fairies seem to belong on the earthly side of the fence, with us. But the kind of fairy interaction from the modern fairy practitioners at least, is much more akin to interactions with the ethereal kinds of spiritual manifestations. As discussed, in folklore, certainly up until the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, any approaches towards the fairies was usually propitiatory, to prevent their anger or vindictiveness, but in these more modern cases, the interactions are encouraged, and offerings made as a sign of devotion and also gratitude for their help. With fairy spirituality (see previous chapter), the querant approaches the fairy for counsel or wisdom. There is a strong spiritual texture to this practice, like praying to a saint. In the Catholic tradition, saints represent different aspects and institutions of human life and experience, St Jude for lost causes, St Anthony if you cannot find your wallet. Prayers, lit candles and offerings all help with engaging the assistance of the appropriate saint for the immediate need. And this practice seems to be replicated with Kay and Casely.<sup>33</sup>

Modern fairy spirituality appears to be a product of two strands of supernatural belief: Theosophy and Wicca. The Theosophical strand, as discussed in the previous chapter, is not proposing a particular spiritual path of fairy worship, but rather positing the idea that fairies are spiritual aspects of the natural world with a particular spiritual function that can also include,

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<sup>31</sup> Elsie Wright copied some of the fairies from the *Princess Mary Giftbook*, 1914, adding wings to the figures.

<sup>32</sup> D. Purkiss, op. cit., p.85

<sup>33</sup> K. Kay, op. cit., C. Casely, op. cit.



but is not directly necessary, interaction with humans, primarily for the preservation of nature.<sup>34</sup>

Theosophy is one of the strong influences on the development that fairy belief has been taking since the early twentieth century and that seems to be continuing to the present. On the other hand, fairy Wicca, ‘pioneered above all by Kisma Stepanich in the 1990s’<sup>35</sup> seeks to create a spiritual, even quasi-religious practice with fairies at the centre of a largely eco-minded, nature focused version of ‘mainstream’ Wicca. Stepanich works largely in the tradition of Irish fairy folklore, which is not the focus of this thesis and has considerable divergence from fairy belief in England, however, her core belief and spirituality, creating a Wicca style practice via fairy belief can still throw some light on new spiritual pathways being created in this niche area. She defines her practice as ‘centred in the message of a division of ego-soul, ergo conscious separation from divinity due to a warrior spirit, which may have occurred after Celtic tribes invaded Ireland.’<sup>36</sup> Stepanich goes onto explain the character of these ‘Celtic warriors’ who ‘held a strong belief in the invisible and natural worlds; the land was of extreme importance to them and considered sacred.’<sup>37</sup> What is interesting is the similarity of Stepanich’s narrative on the Irish tradition of fairy belief, and the Anglo-Saxon elves as depicted by Alaric Hall and Karen Jolly.<sup>38</sup> Stepanich speaks of the ‘warrior spirit’ of the Celtic tribes that ‘was not aimed at conquering nature but other human beings.’<sup>39</sup> This is very familiar and similar to Hall’s assertion that the behaviour of elves causing sudden pain and illness in animals and in humans is not necessarily of a diabolical nature of harm, but a punishment for a transgression against nature.<sup>40</sup> The invading Celtic tribes who supposedly founded Irish fairy belief, Stepanich believes ‘might have been... gaining trust of nature’s domicile, engaging in battles of challenge to become an entrusted champion.’<sup>41</sup> Stepanich’s mission then, in establishing a pathway of fairy

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<sup>34</sup> Fairy Investigation Society [www.fairyist.com/whatisafairy](http://www.fairyist.com/whatisafairy), op. cit. accessed 19/02/2024.

<sup>35</sup> K. Reidling, *Faery-Faith Traditional Wisdom*, Authorhouse. 2004, p.xxi

<sup>36</sup> Ibid., p.xxvii

<sup>37</sup> Ibid., p.xxviii

<sup>38</sup> K. Jolly, 1997, op. cit., p132.; A. Hall, 2007, op. cit., p.54

<sup>39</sup> K. Reidling, op. cit., p.xxviii

<sup>40</sup> A. Hall, op. cit., p.115

<sup>41</sup> K. Reidling, op. cit., p.xxviii

spirituality and fairy Wiccan practice is to re-establish a hypothetical Celtic fairy practice of turning humans back to the care and veneration of nature, of changing the ‘mentality of humankind, which turned ever increasingly toward conquering and annihilating the natural world’. Stepanich believes that ‘the Faery [sic] Faith has evolved over the centuries, undergoing reconstruction and needing a great deal of recreating to become a viable practice of today.’ She goes on to explain, ‘the spiritual work we do today in the Faith is centred around co-habitation with the natural world, reconnecting with the dormant powers of the ‘Other World’, re-activating doorways into these realms, awakening Faery Sleepers (Guides, Guardians, allies and companions), to assist us in connecting more fully with their world.’<sup>42</sup> Could this be an explanation for the resurgence of fairy belief in the twenty-first century, the hundreds of examples of encounters with fairies recorded by the *Fairy Census*, the interest in new fairy spiritualisms and practices? For Stepanich, ‘every religion, every spiritual tradition, every so-called truth being voiced or lived or practised today probably came from the same source and boils down to the same thing...’<sup>43</sup> She exhorts her followers to believing that ‘the time for the sharing of power is at hand. Let us keep the mystery alive!’<sup>44</sup>

### **Channelling**

The channelling of the spirits of the dead, mostly by Spiritualist mediums, is the most well-known form of channelling, often used in popular culture for entertainment purposes in horror, drama, even comedy. Channelling in recent years has also been most seen in the world of extra-terrestrial communication too. In both of these cases, the medium’s body and/or voice is taken over by the spirit or extra-terrestrial who is able to communicate through them directly to the participants. For example, one popular ET channeller is Darryl Anka, who is an American with a background in film production, but for the past thirty-five years has also been the channel for a

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<sup>42</sup> Ibid., p.xviii

<sup>43</sup> Ibid., p.xxix

<sup>44</sup> Ibid., p.xxx

‘non-physical being from the future’ called Bashar.<sup>45</sup> Anka is often taken over by Bashar for several hours and claims to be unaware of what Bashar says or does while he is channelling. It would appear that his own consciousness withdraws to make way for Bashar’s consciousness. Patricia Cori is also a self-designated channeller of the Sirian High Council and has for many years relayed the advice and warnings of the council to the world via her books and later, the internet.<sup>46</sup> These kinds of channellings seem to be acceptable for ET entities, but why would fairies want to channel messages to humans through another human? There is plenty of evidence to show that fairies can just appear to any human anywhere so why would they need a channel? Why do any of these supernatural beings in fact? And perhaps if we pull at that particular thread, the unravelling might not work in favour of the believers in the supernatural, including mainstream religion. The difference is perhaps in the nature of what is being offered. Both Anka and Cori are channelling beings that offer guidance to individuals for the betterment of humanity. Anka’s being, Bashar is speaking from the future, and from higher dimensions. Cori’s Syrian Council is a little nearer, is at least in the same solar system, so why do they not manifest directly to us? Maybe they cannot, maybe doing so would make things worse, not better, maybe, dare I say it, they just aren’t real and instead, are manifestations of the subconscious of the channellers. In fact, Anka is quite honest in his bio, saying that this could be true, and if he is doing good, trying to make the world a better place, does it actually matter?<sup>47</sup> And both of these personalities<sup>48</sup> and others have made a comfortable living from their practices. I think that culturally, we may be better disposed to well-meaning ETs who do not want us to destroy ourselves. But fairies, traditionally, in every phase of history, are not like this. They pursue their agenda and only seek human contact when they need something. In the

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<sup>45</sup> D. Anka, [www.Bashar.org](http://www.Bashar.org) About Darryl Anka, 2024, accessed February 2025

<sup>46</sup> Pat Cori, [www.patriciacori.com](http://www.patriciacori.com), accessed February 2025

<sup>47</sup> D. Anka, [www.Bashar.org](http://www.Bashar.org) op. cit.

<sup>48</sup> C. Partridge: Channeling Extraterrestrials: Theosophical Discourse in the Space Age In: Handbook of Spiritualism and Channeling, BRILL, 2015, p.390-391

end, fairy channelling, at least in the way that has been demonstrated, in the ET field, has not been embraced by the fairy field.

However, the current way of perceiving fairies is that they want to help humankind, and that perception is being promoted by some of the aforementioned fairy practitioners, so maybe it is the future of fairy belief. But a longstanding perception of the fairy folk is to keep away from fairies, to leave them offerings, but to also keep iron around the outside of the house to keep them at bay. There is some evidence of some fairies offering their help in more traditional folklore, for example, Brownies, who commonly occur in the North of England, and are specifically helper fairies, who will do chores, and some external labour,<sup>49</sup> but in many accounts of other fairies, the human ends up suffering in some way. In *Tam Lin*, the heroine of the story ends up cursed by the Fairy Queen for stealing away and keeping for herself, the eponymous fairy knight, who, it turns out was himself a kidnapped human, taken for the fairies' 'tithe to hell'.<sup>50</sup> *Yallery Brown* offers help to a farmhand who thanks the mannikin and dies with it screaming in his ear,<sup>51</sup> and Bessie Dunlop, one of the condemned Scottish Witches of the sixteenth century accepts the help of the fairy Tom to cure her neighbours, who tells her he is a human soldier who died at the battle of Pinkie. Dunlop confesses this and is strangled then burnt by the authorities for witchcraft.<sup>52</sup> It seems that the change in the nature of fairies comes after the influence of Theosophy, which changes the nature of the fairies from supernatural to spiritual as previously mentioned, turning them from something to be avoided, to something to be worshipped.

It might be apposite here to mention the frequent conflation between fairies and angels, largely because consulting fairies using practitioners, oracle cards and such like, is very similar to the

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<sup>49</sup> K. Briggs, *A Dictionary of Fairies*, op. cit., p.45

<sup>50</sup> See other chapters in this thesis

<sup>51</sup> See other chapters in this thesis

<sup>52</sup> E. Wilby, op. cit., p.xv

way that angel spirituality has been promoted in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries too. Like fairies, there is a divergence between the Judeo/Christian/Islamic tradition of angels, which dates back to Old Testament times. Again, in the centuries before Theosophy and Spiritualism, fairies were devious self-serving tricksters, and angels were the envoys of God (this is also a trope visible in Islam with Jinn).<sup>53</sup> Angels have been supplicated to for centuries. They occur in the Old Testament, as a powerful army of God, as emissaries to the Jewish Kings and commanders.<sup>54</sup> They appear in the Gospels, to Elizabeth, mother of John the Baptist, to Mary of course, the mother of Jesus, to Joseph in a dream, to the shepherds in a celestial display to rival many, to the Magi, again in a dream, to Mary Magdalene at Jesus' tomb, to the apostles and even to the convert Paul. There is a tradition, perhaps even longer than fairy tradition, of angel belief that occurs in mainstream religion. But their role could not be more different from how fairies are held and indeed how angels are also being approached in this tradition. The angels have gone from mighty warriors and messengers to oracles, again beginning in the nineteenth century, communing with humankind and offering advice and guidance for example, via angel oracle cards. Enochian magic goes back to Jon Dee in the sixteenth century, and has been taken up by many in the New Age world, most notably Aleister Crowley and later, the Hermetic Order of the Golden Dawn.<sup>55</sup> It eventually trickled down to more popular applications in New Age magic, merging with Qabbalistic magic in the 1980s. John Kruse however traces the conflation of angels and fairies to the early eighteenth century, and also suggests that the idea of fairies and angels being similar or even the same may have an even longer history. Brother Richard, a Capuchin-Franciscan Friar from Ireland, argues that angels are not necessarily only supernatural beings. He states that the word for angel in Greek means messenger, and anyone, including humans, who bring messages from God can be considered angelic, and he also concludes that if that is the case, then there is room for fairies, fauns, even demons in the

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<sup>53</sup> R. Lebling, *Legends of the Fire Spirits*, Berkeley: Counterpoint, 2020, p.1-7

<sup>54</sup> P. Stanford, *Angels, a History*, Hodder Faith, 2019, p.20

<sup>55</sup> M. Booth, *A Magick Life, Biography of Aleister Crowley*, Coronet, 2001, p.2-3

Creator's mind.<sup>56</sup> The Angels that are invoked in angel magic currently, are usually the Archangels, whose names may be familiar to many, Michael, Raphael, Gabriel, for example. Each archangel has a specific responsibility and energy that can be called upon to help the querant. Recently, angel energy has been combined with Reiki healing, with practitioners calling upon the various archangel energies in a healing session.<sup>57</sup> In certain respects, the kind of spiritual practice being offered, whether by fairies or angels, is pretty much the same, and it is only the choice of entity that differs, and that entity differs in name, though the naming of the being does then invoke traditional connotations. But for many it is the healing or the advice that is important, rather than the entity.

## **Case Studies – Fairy Practitioners**

### **1) Karen Kay**

For Karen Kay, her starting point for fairy belief was a series of external encounters with fairies in her Grandmother's garden when she was a child. But her continued experience of fairies, in adulthood, certainly in her work promoting fairy events and selling her fairy and mermaid oracle cards, tends to be through meditation. So, this is a very different type of fairy encounter, both for Kay and the participants in her meditations. She is working in the tradition of Spiritualism and Theosophy, as a medium and clairvoyant. Kay is at the forefront of fairy consultation and connection, organising at least two 'fairy' balls a year in Glastonbury, with a corresponding market and free talks. She has also hosted and organised the *Three Wishes Fairy Festival* for several years, first in Cornwall and for the last two years also in Glastonbury. In terms of exposure Kay is probably one of the most popular and well known of fairy practitioners, with regular appearances on daytime TV and her profile with Hay House Publishing, one of the most important and influential publishers of new age literature.<sup>58</sup> Kay talks of initial accidental

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<sup>56</sup> J. Hickey-Hall, Modern fairy sightings podcast, Dec 2024

<sup>57</sup> K. and C. Core, [www.Angelreikiuk.com](http://www.Angelreikiuk.com), 2019, accessed February 2025

<sup>58</sup> K. Kay, [www.hayhouse.co.uk](http://www.hayhouse.co.uk), accessed June 2025

encounters as a child, when she made fairy perfumes from the flowers in her grandmother's garden, but she now, as a fairy medium, receives messages from the fairy realm to relay to people through her website. They are certainly more the kind of fairies one would like to communicate with.

The gift of infinite luck and good fortune are bestowed on you by this fairy queen. She brings you all the symbols of luck to amplify your powers of attraction, so you'll literally become a magnet for luck! She says that we create our own luck too – yes, it is true that some people are born with a silver spoon in their mouth, but we all have the capability to create good fortune for ourselves. Our view of good fortune is as limited (or unlimited) as our imagination! How freeing does that make you feel!? So, spread your wings, soar high, and receive all the love and luck the human and fairy worlds have to offer! Perhaps you feel that you're on an unlucky streak. If so, simply call upon the Fairy Queen of Luck to remove any obstacles that stand in the way of you receiving your full quota of good fortune! It is worth keeping in mind that 'where attention goes, energy flows,' so make a point of noticing the blessings in your life.<sup>59</sup>

Kay has designed and published fairy oracle cards, in the tradition of the tarot, for seekers to gain fairy wisdom. They are beautiful pictures of fairies representing different requirements: abundance, hope, peace, etc. One carries out a reading or spread according to the accompanying guidebook which gives helpful advice to the querant. As many websites do, Kay also invites people to sign up to updates via email, including a weekly card draw, where she selects a card at random and sends out the meanings to her followers.

Oracle of the Fairies is a modern deck for people who love nature and know that there is more to life than what can be seen with our physical eyes – use this oracle as the portal to the realm of fairy magic and manifest your way to wonders untold!

The fairies wish for everyone to experience their ancient wisdom and feel connected to the Earth. They are the guardians of nature, magical manifestors—they wish only to create beautiful blessings in our lives. Now there is a way to receive these blessings, using the Oracle of the Fairies as the doorway to the invisible realm of possibility just beyond our fingertips. Created by Karen Kay, renowned fairy communicator, Oracle of the Fairies will guide the user to seek out fairy wisdom and receive concrete answers that will bring inspiration

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<sup>59</sup> K. Kay, Luck card, Oracle of the Fairies, 2019, Hay House Publishing, p.72

and solutions to everyday questions. Each reading will share positive and practical fairy insight, directly related to the user's unique energy and personal circumstances.<sup>60</sup>

Kay's cards are very similar to angel oracle cards, with which these kinds of fairies appear to have been conflated. And these kinds of fairies are the most popular at the moment, almost single handedly thanks to Kay, who is the editor in chief of FAE magazine, and columnist in the now defunct *Soul and Spirit Magazine*. Her recent self-help book *Fairy Whispering* offers a range of practical ways to engage with fairies for general wellbeing and health.<sup>61</sup> Within and outside of the New Age community, tentatively appearing at the edge of mainstream culture, this is the current and predominant iteration of fairies.

### **Hay House Publishing**

In the field of spirituality, great is the influence of the publishing house that seems to be at the forefront of the popularisation of fairy belief in this particular vein, founded by Louise L. Hay in the 1980s, who was very much a pioneer in the self-help genre, and was a bestselling author for most of her life. Her most famous work, *You can Heal your Life*, still in print, still popular, is the epitome of what we might call wellbeing and mindfulness that continues to have a strong influence over popular and even mainstream alternative medical culture. Louise Hay comes from a background in Religious Science,<sup>62</sup> and there are some similarities of the teachings that Hay House encourages, and the change in the perception of fairies by Theosophy. It is no surprise perhaps, why Karen Kay has been so successful in forging the fairy path that she is largely responsible for. There does not seem to be a direct connection between Religious Science and Spiritualism and Theosophy, however, there is certainly a sympathetic resonance between these spiritual movements, which reflect the notion of spirituality currently.

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<sup>60</sup> K, Kay, Oracle Cards, [www.karenkay.co.uk](http://www.karenkay.co.uk) , accessed 30/07/2024

<sup>61</sup> K. Kay, *Fairy Whispering*, 2024, pp.1-15

<sup>62</sup> Religious Science, founded by Ernest Holmes in the 1920s, was a more ecumenical version of Mary Baker Eddy's Christian Science, that Holmes had first been introduced to as a teenager.



## **Glastonbury Fairy Market and Ball**

In 2023, when I visited one of Karen Kay's Fairy events that take place in Spring and Autumn in Glastonbury Town Hall, Somerset, the theme was *The Flower Fairies* to coincide with the centenary of the publication in 1923, of Cicely Mary Barker's books. The plain and fairly rudimentary town hall, with kitchen at one end and stage at the other, was transformed for the weekend by the stalls and stall holders, into a veritable fairy market. On Saturday morning, it was packed out, with people queueing to get around the horseshoe formation of stalls, ranging from general paraphernalia of the New Age kind to ornate headdresses and costumes, many of which made an appearance at the Fairy Ball later that evening. There were beautifully handcrafted fairy houses, a fairy *World of Warcraft*, lots of 'fairy' essentials oils, some classified according to the flower fairy scents, in keeping with the theme. There were crystals, handmade and very expensive fairy dolls, general Wicca merchandise, clothes mostly of the hippy kind, hats, steampunk costumes, books, including a stall to promote the works of the guest speakers and also to promote Kay's oracle cards. Most of the stall holders and shoppers were predominantly female and were suitably attired in general New Age garb, but also very definitely as fairy queens and gnomes, or hippy or punk style fairies, some with wings, some not. Some of the few male stall holders and visitors seemed to have a similar uniform of top hat, collarless shirt, and waistcoat, as their nod to the fairy aesthetic. Some of the hats were decorated with horns or ivy. My favourite stall was Kate Ray's mushroom and toadstool jewellery which consist of handmade mostly fly agaric type mushrooms as earrings and necklaces, some combined with crystals to be used as pendants for scrying or dowsing. It was a wonderful, hectic, 'goblin market' ambience without the evil goblins themselves. In a smaller side room, which was a little quieter, there were some fairy fortune tellers, and a wonderful woman who wove strips of tinsel into my hair, fairy highlights, some of which remained until the end of the year! Throughout the day, there were free workshops, which were more like talks than anything really practical. One workshop was led by Clare Stone who, perhaps confusingly, works with angels. According to her

website, Stone is a 'spiritual author and angel intuitive' and has made a living from channelling angels for healing.<sup>63</sup> There is no mention at all of fairies, though she does talk about 'spirits' in a general sense. One gets the impression that she shoehorned the fairies into her talk and was included in the event because she is Kay's fellow author with Hay House. Stone took us through a guided meditation and kept it generic. The book she was promoting certainly did not refer to fairies at all either. But her inclusion at the fayre and here in this chapter does highlight the closeness between Spiritualist and Theosophical discourse on fairies and fairy belief itself. However, the most exciting talk was by Kate Ray, a ghost hunter (and aforementioned fungi jewellery maker), turned fairy hunter, who recounted some very compelling and occasionally unsettling encounters with fairies. The Fairy Ball, however, was little more than a gig with fancy dress. There was a folk band, there were impressive cosplayers, paid models which is a customary thing with Karen Kay's events, and a paid fairyland photobooth for souvenir pictures with the models and Kay herself. There were themed fairy beverages, but again, it was a gig with a very good band and a raucous and enthusiastic audience.

## **2) Claire Casely**

Clare Casely is another practitioner of fairy communication. Her approach differs from Kay's, but it seems to have similar aims. In fact, both Kay and Casely call themselves 'Faery' or 'Fairy Whisperers,' and the rivalry between them has also led to both registering these titles as trademarks, with Casely registering 'Faery Whisperer' in 2021, and Kay registering 'Fairy Whispering', which is also the title of her recent book, in 2024. The title of Fairy or Faery Whisperer appears to convey a special relationship with fairies. The first coinage of 'Whisperer' in conjunction with the taming or controlling of a being appears to be Horse and also Dog Whisperer in eighteenth century. Adding 'Whisperer' to animals, humans and indeed supernatural entities has been more prolific in the twenty-first century, and the meaning

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<sup>63</sup> C. Stone, [www.clairestone.co.uk/about-me-claire-stone/](http://www.clairestone.co.uk/about-me-claire-stone/) accessed 21/02/2024

appears to be synonymous with expert, guru, or teacher. I have recently heard of various foreign ambassadors to the USA being dubbed ‘Trump Whisperer’ so it is taking on a wider meaning in our culture. Casely is also an accredited life coach and an art teacher and therapist, and according to her website, she uses her art to convey messages from ‘the Otherworld.’ She also markets herself as a media consultant for anyone who is making content about fairies for film and TV. Under the pseudonym Claire Sylvan-Wand, Casely hosts *The Fairy Whispering Podcast*. It begins with the premise that fairies are whispering all around us, but modern life is just too loud and noisy to hear them.<sup>64</sup> So she advocates for a quietening, meditative, withdrawing from modern life and all its stresses, so that we can hear what the ‘fairies are whispering about.’ There is a sense that spills over from other aspects of her practice, of the therapeutic nature of listening, and the idea certainly that choosing a quieter, more mindful approach to life, even for a short time, can be beneficial. There is nothing new in that respect, most wellbeing and mindfulness practices call for a slowing down, more relaxed pace of life, or at least the creation of a space, in the busy, everyday tasks, to take time to relax and tune into nature. But the implication of Casely’s practice is that of insight into what is going on in the fairy world. By taking the obvious wellbeing practice of calm, quiet meditation, as a doorway to listening and hearing the whispers of the fairies, who are maybe trying to tell us something to our advantage.

### **3) Jo Hickey Hall**

Jo Hickey Hall has been writing the ‘Scarlett of the Fae’ blog since 2016, calling for us all to ‘remain curious’. She thinks that the people who are drawn to her blog are searching for something, as she is too. She launched her project, *Modern Fairy Sightings* and in 2020, and her podcast of the same name. Over the years, Hall has invited people from different walks of life, including New Age practitioners, but also lay people, to talk about their experiences with fairies and fairy like beings. She is a very sympathetic listener, allowing the speaker to tell their story

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<sup>64</sup> C. Casely, [www.thefairywhispering.com](http://www.thefairywhispering.com) op. cit., accessed June 2025

without challenge. There have been some wondrous stories, some strange and some quite horrific, hence her disclaimer at the start of each episode, to 'take heed, we are not talking about winged Tinkerbells here, these are real fairies, real encounters, which took people like you and me by surprise.'<sup>65</sup> Hall is very much the open minded researcher, calling herself a folklore researcher, unlike Kay and Casely who are very upfront about their ability to connect with the fairies, even though Hall also talks about her New Age practice and also hosts other fairy practitioners who offer connection with the fairies. And she also does admit to connecting with the fairies on a meditative level, to be sure to have permission.<sup>66</sup> Hall earned her MA in History in 2015 under the supervision of Ronald Hutton, the Godfather of Folklore research, and her academic research has appeared in several academic works on fairies. In episode thirteen of the podcast, Jo recounts her own fairy encounter which took place in 2007, when she really had not considered the existence of fairies at all after a childhood with a fairy tale telling Irish father. Later, in her twenties, she learned about New Age practices with a local practitioner. She did not, however believe in fairies. She says it was a step too far for her. Then, a few years later, she was having a sunset picnic with her then boyfriend, now husband, looking at the stars. She turned around and saw, about five to eight metres from them, a little green man, two and half feet tall. He wore a hat, and his eyes were very penetrating as he looked right at her. His skin was incredibly ancient. She recounts that he seemed as curious at seeing her as she was to be seeing him. Then she blinked and he was gone. She said nothing to her boyfriend but sat there incredulous.<sup>67</sup> Hall was convinced he wanted to be seen, and maybe that was true given her own scepticism about fairy beings.

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<sup>65</sup> J. Hickey Hall, The Modern Fairy Sightings Podcast, various episodes

<sup>66</sup> *ibid.*, episode 13

<sup>67</sup> J. Hickey Hall, The Modern Fairy sightings podcast, *op. cit.*, episode 13

Each of these three practitioners have had close, personal and emotional encounters with what they have interpreted as fairies or fairy like beings, which seem to have confirmed the paths they have eventually decided to follow in their spiritual and indeed financial lives.

If you are not looking for any kind of alternative therapy or spirituality, most of the output detailed in this chapter will probably pass you by, but there are certainly many opportunities to engage with some of the practices discussed, even at the superficial level, in nail bars, beauty therapy and massage, spas, and even some pharmacies, where references to wellbeing and mindfulness jargon are becoming commonplace. Once you delve into alternative therapies, the offers are myriad, and range in an eclecticism of esoteric paths. Fairy practice is still more niche, with the exception of children's parties, perhaps. But, as an indication of the effect fairies have on culture, fairy belief and the (relatively) new fairy spirituality join with other pathways, old and new, to influence and construct a different kind of religious and spiritual practice.

## Chapter Nine

### What Fairies are and What Cultural Work they are Doing

‘Diligent as ever in killing the things they loved, the passionate embrace of Victorian love robbed the fairy of breath... they obstinately refuse to flourish; they have no roots and no branches, no real resonance. This is because the fairy was not banished from all culture by the excesses of Victoriana, but only from high culture. She never found a place in Modernism; indeed, she represented pretty strenuously everything Modernism was against.’

Diane Purkiss<sup>1</sup>

Left yesternight, scarce leaves more proof behind  
Of midnight sports, when they from day retire,  
Than in these rings my fancy seems to find  
Of fairy revels; and I stoop to see  
Their little footmarks in each circling stain,  
And think I hear them, in their summer glee,  
Wishing for night, that they may dance again;  
Till shepherd's tales, told neath the leaning tree  
While shunning showers, seem Bible truths to me-

John Clare<sup>2</sup>

I heard the fairies in a ring  
Sing as they tripped a lilting round  
Soft as the moon on wavering wing.  
The starlight shook as if with sound,  
As if with echoing, and the stars  
Prankt their bright eyes with trembling gleams  
While red with war the gusty Mars  
Rained upon earth his ruddy beams.  
He shone alone, low down the West,  
While I, behind a hawthorn-bush,  
Watched on the fairies flaxen-tressed  
The fires of the morning flush.  
Till, as a mist, their beauty died,  
Their singing shrill and fainter grew;  
And daylight tremulous and wide  
Flooded the moorland through and through.

Walter De La Mare<sup>3</sup>

In the twenty-first century, it is time to recognise the significance and influence of fairies and fairy belief on socio-cultural constructs. At the beginning of this thesis, I posed two questions: ‘what are fairies?’, and ‘what cultural work are they doing?’<sup>4</sup> I have sought to open the discussion and offer some insights by exploring history, folklore, participant witness statements and

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<sup>1</sup> D. Purkiss, *Troublesome things*, 2000, op. cit., p.304

<sup>2</sup> J. Clare, *Fairy Rings*, 1838

<sup>3</sup> W. De La Mare, *The Fairies Dancing*, 1901 - 1918

<sup>4</sup> R. F. Green, op. cit., p.3

observation, and ethnographic evidence. I have argued that I am advocating for ‘a wide ranging and comprehensive study of fairies and fairy-like beings.’ It is not that fairies are not being discussed. They are. However, any discussion is largely at the popular level, or as a part of a larger area of analysis, such as discussions of fairy stories in cultural theory of literary studies. Within these discussions, fairies *per se* often receive little analysis. By placing fairies at the centre of this thesis, I have fulfilled Linda Woodhead’s brief, of not ignoring the central element of all the activity discussed here.<sup>5</sup> I have brought together the history, the folklore, the encounters, and the cultural influences of fairies and fairy belief. I have also taken on board C.S. Lewis’ assertion by treating the fairies as ‘things in the real world,’ and Richard Firth Green’s, by investigating ‘what they are,’ by creating a timeline of fairy belief, and the folkloric traits which define them. I have examined many accounts from participants and observers who have had encounters with fairies and fairy-like beings, and found commonalities and differences between them, and the history and folklore that describes them, and ‘what cultural work they are doing,’ by examining three large cultural topic areas, nostalgia, enchantment and spirituality, how fairies influence them and how these areas have influenced fairy belief.

### **What are fairies?**

I want to examine the impact of these two parts of the overall argument of this thesis, beginning with the nature and personality of fairies, as described by history, folklore, eyewitnesses and practitioners.

What fairies are depends on who you ask. There is no single definition of what constitutes a fairy, how could there be? There are so many types and interpretations. History shows how ideas of fairies have been established and how they have changed. Folklore shows us how what we include under the umbrella of fairy has developed. It also shows how the meaning of the

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<sup>5</sup> L. Woodhead, *The Gods of Spirituality* op. cit., p.49-71

word 'fairy' has changed from meaning the place they come from, in the Medieval period, to the name of the beings that are little, magical and largely unseen, in the Early Modern period, to the specific type of creature that is feminine, dressed in flowing garments, with wings, a tiara and wand. This latter image is what endures to the present day. Perhaps it is easier to identify what fairy is not. Humans who have experienced fairy encounters draw from the entirety of history and folklore in their descriptions. And as soon as we decide what fairies are, that definition does not contain them. We establish that they are little, then someone sees a fairy with wings that is nine feet tall, we decide they are feminine and along come the little men in caps and hobnail boots, we decide that they are mischievous, even demonical, and we meet with Brownies, Hobs and oracles. I want to give clarity to and address what a fairy is materially, but also what fairies mean to the humans that experience them.

Luckily, when Dr. Simon Young devised his survey for the Fairy Census, he included a section for people to write what they personally believed fairies to be. I said at the start, and as discussed in previous chapters, the participants in fairy encounters describe the fairies according to the range of history and folklore, showing that there are many definitions of fairy and that 'it depends on whom you ask.'

The most popular opinion seems to be, however, a certain hesitancy in defining the fairies at all, '[What are fairies?] I honestly do not know...' or 'Don't know [about fairies], I assume they just exist...' or 'Fairies? Not sure, maybe manifestations of something that exist just outside our reality.' Some participants' encounters chime with the Anglo-Saxon 'unseen' tradition of fairy belief: 'It does feel like I've glimpsed something that didn't want to be seen', or '[Fairies] are human-like creatures, clever, small and not usually seen.' Or 'I assume they just exist and can become visible for a short while and then vanish, as mine did.' Some coincide with the Early Modern belief of 'Little People', Fairies are small, twinkling beings.' Or '...little people from a different dimension'. 'Energy' is also a popular term when discussing fairies, perhaps referring to



the idea of their physical form, which is not corporeal apparently. '[Fairies] are an earth energy...' Or '[Fairies] are energies that we interpret somehow, e.g. daisy energy = daisy fairy.' Energy is also a theosophical concept, and these examples show how the Theosophical definition of fairies has taken hold.<sup>6</sup> Also being part of another dimension is mentioned several times, harking back to the Medieval idea of Fairyland. 'Nature spirits? A connection to beings in another sphere of existence?' Or 'It's probably quantum! Most things are. I think they may be from a different reality.' Being a part of the land, however, implies that the fairies are also of this dimension. 'Beings closer to the Earth than us.' Or 'A very old race of beings, part of the land.' Or 'spirits of nature and place.' Or '[They are] ancient folk that have always been here but exist behind a veil which is rarely opened.' So, we go further back to the beliefs of the ancient Greeks and Romans, later revived in the nineteenth century, with Spiritualism and again, Theosophy. There is also evidence of the conflation between angels and fairies spoken of, which also fits in with some of the discussions had in this thesis. In particular, the idea that fairies are provided by God for the 'flora and fauna', just as God provides the Angels for us 'to interpret His will.' And that also connects us to the natural world. This is a delightfully original take on both the relationship between angels and fairies, and between humans and nature, and is similar to the ideas expressed in Dora Van Gelder's book, that fairies and angels act like a kind of nature 'Civil Service' with fairies making sure the nature functions under the supervision of the angel overseers.<sup>7</sup>

Until this final chapter, I have not wanted to engage with psychological explanations for fairies and fairy belief. I did not want to open the doorway to a discussion of the veracity or reality of the existence of fairies. In a cursory study such as this, I could not do justice to the nuances of psychological explanations of belief in general. There is enough investigation into the

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<sup>6</sup> The Seven Planes of Consciousness, in Theosophy in Today's World, Theosophical Society in New Zealand, 2020, pp.2-3

<sup>7</sup> D. Van Gelder, The Real World of Fairies, Quest Books, 1999, p.8

psychology of belief to show that there are other explanations than ‘*it is all in the mind*,’ but to look into it in only a superficial way runs the risk merely of confirming such a diagnosis.

However, the psychological explanation of the nature of belief, in the universal sense, is helpful.

An article in *Psychology Today* shows two possible explanations for belief, the first, based on ‘the human need to make sense of the natural world around us.’ The second example uses the work of Durkheim and Weber, in offering not a ‘natural world’ explanation, ‘but a social one.’<sup>8</sup>

These two hypotheses give us an overview of belief in general but also represent why individual kinds of belief systems are so compelling. For example, in terms of making sense of the world, fairies are known for their mischief and propensity to hide or steal important human objects, or to swap our babies for changelings, or to carry off young people to fairyland never to be seen again. There are many events such as these, and there can just be no explanation for the disappearance of both objects and people. Why not blame a supernatural element? Loss is a strong, agonising human emotion and materialistic explanations for loss are not always straightforward. Lewis Carroll sums it up nicely in *Alice Through the Looking Glass*, ‘Why, sometimes I’ve believed as many as six impossible things before breakfast.’<sup>9</sup> It is a very human thing to want to believe in an elevated world that can lift us out of the mundanity of the material world. We are forever creating special spaces, sacred spaces, enchanted spaces, and we populate them with creatures unlike us, or close to us but with one important difference. In the case of the fairies, the magical powers they possess. So materially, the fairies possess beauty, with ornate costumes, strange body shapes, bright and decorative lights, beguiling music, unusual faces, close enough to human guise, but different enough to engage our interest and curiosity. Psychologically, fairies help us to make sense of the world, to provide us with a contrast to the everyday, to give us motives for the inexplicable. Socially, we can learn from each other’s beliefs and superstitions, giving us a sense of purpose and understanding and even

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<sup>8</sup> J. S. Debles Carl, *The Psychological Origin of Supernatural Thinking*, in *Psychology Today*, 2023

<sup>9</sup> L. Carroll, *Through the Looking Glass, and what Alice found there*, 1871.

community. Fairies are something well known, part of our history and our culture, part of every culture. Whatever we think that fairies are, we make them make sense. This is not unique to fairy belief; many supernatural creatures do this for us too. But fairies are closer to us because they most resemble us.

Both Lewis' and Green's exhortation to define what fairies are, becomes more complex as time goes on. Fairies have always been hard to pin down, evolving according to the times and the people that encounter them. Right now, fairies seem to be at the pinnacle of femininity (in their costumes and beauty), and as purveyors of wisdom and wellbeing. And no doubt, in two hundred years, they will change again, into something new, or into something we have encountered before. In the end, at least as a fairy researcher, it is best to 'remain curious' to take up Jo Hickey Hall's mantra, to judge whatever entity we come across according to what we believe fairies to be.

In the end, fairies deeply influence the three main cultural areas that I will go on to demonstrate: nostalgia for a sense of continuance and connection with the past, enchantment which helps us understand the world better, and spirituality which combines social and intellectual ways of understanding.

### **What Cultural Work Are the Fairies Doing?**

Moving on from the many and varied definitions and descriptions of fairies and fairy-like beings, the second part of Green's question is how fairies participate in aspects of our culture. For many, fairies influence several important parts of our culture, both high and vernacular. In this thesis, I have found fairies' influence in three main specific areas:

- Nostalgia: Fairies have always represented the past, the idealised, fictionalised past that we imagine, to comfort us in our less than satisfactory present. Their clothes are always

historical, sometimes even classical. They represent a rural way of life, again imagined as better than living in urban jungles with no greenery. They represent past wisdom that we've seemingly abandoned in favour of innovation that seems unfamiliar and difficult.

- Enchantment: Fairy, in the general sense, transforms the mundane into the enchanted.

Fairies themselves are decorative and unusual, then there are lights, idealised nature, the prettiest of mammals and birds, and recently, the inclusion of dragons and unicorns. Fairy also transforms a space only for a short time, making the desire for it ever stronger, like Brigadoon, Blackpool Illuminations, Christmas.

- Spirituality: In the last one hundred and fifty years, fairies have become a part of the spiritual development of our culture, through Spiritualism, Theosophy, New Ageism, Neo-paganism, Well-being and mindfulness.

Fairies have also influenced and left their stamp on the arts, for example, in paintings, sculpture, dance, music, cinema, television and of course photography. In literature as the subject of myth, legend, tale and theatre for thousands of years. Fairy belief has formed a part of social cohesion in communities across the British Isles and continue to influence aesthetically.

Diane Purkiss has oft been cited in this thesis, largely because her work *Troublesome Things* has much value in the discussion of fairies and fairy belief, particularly in detailing historical features. However, I want to disagree with her assertion that the fairies are dead but given some of the evidence she presents it is hard to quarrel with her. Fairies began to drift into the feminine and infantile spheres of culture (and it is not too much of a stretch to connect the idea that the feminine and the childlike have been conflated during the Victorian and Modern period and in some cases for nefarious purposes) it extends to today, when sadly, at the Warwick Castle gift

shop, for example, a pink, tulle bedecked outfit and vastly inferior pink plastic sword, was all that was on offer for any wayward girl who thought dressing up as a knight might be a good idea.

But pinkification of everything fun to relate it to girls aside, the fairies are returning in a less infantile guise. Cottingley, Enid Blyton, Cicely Mary Barker, and Disney et al, did their utmost to reinforce the decorative, pink, fairy culture through the first half of the twentieth century. But maybe that is also a little unfair. The popular fairies of the twentieth century still have power and agency. Tinkerbell, created by Disney in 1953 may have been modelled on Marilyn Monroe. If not, she certainly took on the sexy, 'blonde bombshell' archetype popular at that time. She was in love with Peter Pan and furiously jealous of Wendy, to the extent of putting the girl's life in danger. She betrays Peter at first but then puts her own life on the line to save him. Then in *Sleeping Beauty*, the fairy Maleficent, reacts like many would, having been left out of the birthday celebrations of the royal Princess. And she is no flutterby fairy, she is also a dangerous dragon. The Blue Fairy in *Pinocchio* tests the wooden puppet, unsure that he could really be good enough to become a real boy. She is unflinching in her testing, his nose grows every time he lies, he is turned into a donkey and finally, dies in the selfless act of saving the life of his creator, Geppetto. I think Purkiss is too hasty to dismiss the twentieth century fairies. They are certainly not cardboard cutouts. As the century progresses, the grown up, magical fairies of old, start to reappear, thanks to artists like Arthur Rackham, the novelist J. R. R. Tolkien (who even invented his very own kind of little people, the Hobbits), Alan Garner, Brian Froud, to name but a few, restore, through their creative interpretations, a more adult kind of fairy, or fairy like being. There is still beauty, but not as much prettiness. Television and Cinema, (*Lost Girl*, *Bright*, *Carnival Row*) are rather niche offerings from the early twenty- first century, but many a niche television show has become a cult with a die-hard following, who creates its own versions long after the series or the film has disappeared. These cultural influences, coupled with the various folklorists, practitioners, and organisations, including the remnants of the original Fairy

Investigation Society (which largely receded during the war years) and its evidence for real fairy encounters, collected over the twentieth century. Then there is the publication of the *Findhorn Garden* and related literature, and so on until the 2010s when Dr Simon Young revived the Fairy Investigation Society and began collecting real encounters with fairies, and Jo Hickey Hall began and continues her *Modern Fairy Sightings* videos and podcasts, means that fairies are quite obviously not dead, but flourishing in the twenty-first century.

Where next for fairies is probably as unpredictable as their history has been. And while for the majority of the population who barely register their presence, for those that do, fairies continue to bring their particular uniqueness to the party. It could be foreseen that fairy belief will continue down the path of healing and helping, which is certainly where the mainstream seems to be going, with increasing opportunities within well-being: fairy meditations, fairy oracle cards, fairy reiki. Karen Kay's fairy enterprises certainly get the widest exposure on daytime television, and fairies are still cropping up in entertainment and marketing.

But by far the largest interest in fairies is still from a historic and folkloric point of view. In the previous chapter I put forward the idea that maybe it is not that the fairies have changed, but rather it is we humans, especially since the internet and social media have taken hold of our lives and our culture. Technology, at least since the nineteenth century has affected fairy belief and the fairies themselves, bringing them literally into the light with the aesthetic use of electricity, and I am sure that will continue with new forms of technology. By far the most important aspect of modernity is that attached to climate change. Fairies have long been a part of some aspects of climate change protest, and so it could be that fairies will continue to attempt to work with humankind in order to promote better relationships with nature. All in all, I have shown that fairies survive, by adapting and evolving through each threat to their cultural existence, and that they also shape those historical and cultural events. But what I hope the most is that the Fairies will retain their mystery, their magic, and their enchantment.



## **Appendix**

### **Fairy Taxonomy**

Every fairy student has addressed the notion of a fairy taxonomy. Some have come up with many hundred species of fairy, some only a few, and some avoid the idea of it altogether. In order to be helpful and to give a historical perspective, I have classified them into five wide categories that also correspond with the chronological descriptions of fairies, since Anglo-Saxon times. None of these taxonomies, including mine, are exhaustive nor definitive.

#### **Invisible, barely, or rarely seen, sounds and music**

Voice coming from underground, asking for help with farming tool – Houlbrook and Young, 2018, p. 27

The Seven Whistlers from Worcester – H&Y, 2018, p.40

Pixies voices heard and treasures left – H&Y, p.46

Pixies cooking food and tidying up the house – H&Y, p.52

Sense or feeling not to enter a wood – H&Y, p.53

Man went into a wood and was pushed off a boulder – H&Y, p.53

Fairies talking in Pudding Pye Hill, Thirsk – H&Y, p.56

Fairy music in Dorset – H&Y, p.70

Invisible crying fairies who have a broken churn staff – H&Y, p.87

A fairy disguised as a hare begs to be set free from the poacher's bag – H&Y, p.88

Fairies disguised as market people turn invisible to steal wares – H&Y, p.88



Small silhouette with a rounded hat moves across the light of a garden lamp – Faery Tale, 2010, p.102

Shadowy figure, vague outline, inside rocks – Hodson, p.36

Hammering noises and the beating of wings in Essex countryside – Tame, p.32

Vanishing tools and voices at night – Tame, p.32

Fairy Music on Dartmoor – Bord, Fairies, Real Encounters with Little People, 1997, p.13

Various objects being stolen or thrown – Bord, 1997, p.16-17

Food, especially butter being left as a gift in exchange for help – Bord, p.18-19

§44) Strange mischievous voices

§48) a very beautiful tinkling sound that came in waves from the garden outside the window. It sounded a little like windchimes, but the sound was stranger and more beautiful.

§49) a small shape with his hands on his hips, ‘humanoid, the size of a toddler, couldn’t see anything but a silhouette framed by a strange faint light.’

§73) funny music, the other two tried to dismiss it as some people playing fiddles or whatever it was in the woods at night! I am a musician and what I heard was not like any music I’ve come across before. I would say it was similar to traditional Irish music but really different, hard to describe.’

§87) the most beautiful music; it seemed to come and go on the breeze. I remember it as a circular tune – plaintive yet joyful. It could have been a flute or a pipe. No accompaniment, just beautiful, sweet music that faded in and out on the air.

§95) 'Pixie-led' experience.

§130) the presence of something faerie, and we felt as if we had been 'pixie-led' (wandering about feeling lost) in the woods. When we finally found our way to the tent of some friends, they confirmed that we looked a bit odd/fay.

§132) a child-like voice warning others that we were near, it uttered something like 'Shh, they're coming.' There were some other voices in reply 'Melodic voices, like children at play.

Heard on Dartmoor, a voice calling Tommy, Tommy, Tommy. Also, fairy music. (Johnson, Ch. 1)

### **Lights**

Hobany's lantern; jack o lantern – H&Y, 2018, p.33

Ball-shaped, misty, white light, not moving – H&Y, 2018, p.34

Shining light in the bin – H&Y, p.52

Strange lights in the bushes and trees – Faery Tale, p.102

Thousands of little lights in the Chalice Well Gardens at Glastonbury – Faery Tale, p.118

Tiny pinpricks of light on Glastonbury Tor – Faery Tale, p.136

§4) Buzzing lights

§6) Lights observed over a period of weeks

§9) 'Dancing balls of light beautiful, around the trees.'

§30) Several lights in and about a hedge. I walked up to the hedge, and the lights started to fade, I also thought I could hear tinkling sounds.

§36) White dots flying around over the gate, they appeared to come over to me stop moving and then turn and fly off.’ ‘[I thought they were fairies] because the lights were so very small, and it felt like it was fairies.’

§51) two lights followed by another six they were flying. Pan pipes.

§64) a glow of light around a tree it was from the bottom of the tree up to mid trunk.

§90A) like ‘tiny lights’.

§110) many little lights (maybe like seventy five to a hundred) appear out of what looked like a sea of bluebells (they were in full bloom at the time) like fireflies, but their light was the same blue/purple shade as the bluebells. They flew around for a few minutes in the most beautiful of shapes. one last cluster and formed a humanoid shape that seemed to turn its head and look at us.

§117) a ball of light floated in through the bedroom door and hovered right in front of me. ‘my name is Effeny and I am very yellow. ‘A ball of light with something moving inside.’

§120) Glimpses of special light.

§127) a small very light presence, about a foot high and it spoke to me.

§131) ‘It was a luminous shape unlike I have seen before glowing and dancing under a streetlight.’ ‘Luminous human looking but very small.’

§138) a swoosh of light that lasted an instant.

### **Beautiful, human sized, regal**

Fairy Queen, green petticoat – H&Y, p.24, (see also, Annabel Gregory article)

Queen of fairy, wearing white linen, fine looking King – Bord, p.23

§38) I kept seeing small, pixie-like folk out the corner of my eye and parts of a twee, medieval-type world, as if this other world were overlapping ‘reality’. For instance, in pushing past a low, leafy branch, I glimpsed it as the decoratively painted end of an old-fashioned cart, the bit that attaches to the horse. I really didn’t want to be seeing this, so I went back to the hut, but grew bored again, so ventured back out into the woods. I once more glimpsed pixies around and about and, convinced I was hallucinating them, determined to prove my eyes wrong by focusing on what I thought of as an ‘elf queen’ standing on the far bank.

§70) a lady downhill from where we were. She wasn’t human, tall, thin, shining in a weird way, with dark hair and off-white long tunic.

§105) several ‘people’ very beautiful, adult-height to me, but more like ‘angels’.

§129) a tall, spear-carrying fairy man, The spear carrying man is very tall and very skinny, strong featured and with longish, messy, light brown hair. He wears a simple silver helm and silver vambraces on his forearms, the rest of his clothing is grey and pale blue, not modern in style. I have also seen some very thin and pale tree spirit types and once a tiny, crow-sized little being dressed in dark clothes.

§136) a female approximate age around twenty. Very tall. Totally pink skin but with blonde hair and translucent shiny pink wings. threw pink glitter as she crossed the room which disappeared as it floated slowly to the floor. ‘Very tall. Maybe seven foot tall. Pink skin and shiny translucent pink wings. She was beautiful but did not smile.

### **Little, mostly male and ugly**

Little men helping a farmer, size of an ear of wheat – H & Y, 2018, p.28

Small (toddler sized) gangly creature, nut brown skin and naked – H&Y, 2018, p.41

Pixie man, eighteen inches tall, odd little hat, pipe, and jug – H&Y, p.48

Wizened little man, 2 feet high, pointed hat, doublet, and knickerbockers – H&Y, p.48

Tiny green man, five inches long, green boots, merry face, red cap – H&Y, p.49

Tiny man dressed in black – H&Y, p.50

Three-foot elderly brown capped figure smock tied with a cord – H&Y, p.5

Little men, red doublet, red pointed hat, green hose – H&Y, p.51

Pixie with cap and jerkin – H&Y, p.51

Small, green figures dancing around a fire – H&Y, p.53

Green man with queer cap – H&Y, p.57

A large group of little creatures, all in green, having a bath with their clothes on – H&Y, p.57

A crowd of little people in brown leather jerkins – H&Y, p.77

Several little figures dressed in brown, small people dressed in bright clothes with radiant faces  
– H&Y, p.77

Hobgoblin in a green coat – H&Y, p.89

Flying fairy calf that disappears – H&Y, p.90

Two tiny people dressed in green – H&Y, p.90

Little gentleman – H&Y, p.91

Little man less than a foot high, dressed in green, cadges a lift from a man who had fallen into the river – H&Y, p.91

Man, and his dog seen chasing around on an inaccessible fell – Sutra Fell in Cumbria, also an army – H&Y, p.92

Little old man, six inches high, brown hat, brown suit, grey beard – Hodson, Fairies at Work and Play, 1922, p.26

Slim 'Brownie,' boyish, reddish hat, greeny-brown costume – Hodson, 1922, p.27

Brownie, 5-6 inches, conical brown deerskin hat, youthful, no beard, brown eyes, green coat, brown stockings, large boots – Hodson, p.30

Elderly brownie, 6-8 inches, long pointed cap, cape like collar, little trousers, long grey beard – Hodson, p.31

Tiny wood elves, covered in shiny green one-piece skin, like bark, large hands and feet, pointy ears, noses, wide mouths, green aura around them – Hodson, p.33

Sea elves, large heads, elfish faces, large ears, little round bodies, short thin legs webbed feet, 3-6 inches high – Hodson, p.33

2.5 feet high, long sharp chin, high cheekbones, thin face, elongated eyes, beady pupils, large ears dark hair, reddish cap, colour of tree bark – Hodson, p.37

Dark grey figure, small, tassel on his hat, old man features, very thin, grey suit, some sort of light carried in his hand – Hodson, p.38

4-6 inches high, gaily coloured, long, bendy arms, furry bat wings, dark, beady eyes – Hodson, p.40

Moorland gnomes, 18 inches – 2.5 feet, peat colour skin, long pointed hats, long curved noses, prominent chin, wide, grinning mouth, black beady elongated eyes, close fitting garment, peat coloured – Hodson, p.42

Mannikin, ruddy complexion, elderly, pointy beards, grey eyebrows, conical cap, thin sharp face, pointed feet, russet coat, grey stocking, pointed foot – Hodson, p.48

Mannikin, 4-6 inches high, pointed cap, long cape like collar, knee breeches, red faces, slanting eyes, can hover above ground – Hodson, p.50

Mannikin with flattened head, fair, with dark eyes, large, ears, Elizabethan style clothes, half red and half green, pointed crimson hat with tassel or bell, 4-6 inches high – Hodson, p.51

6 – 8 inches high, large head, rotund body, thin legs, pointed feet, bright green pointed cap, tight fitting green, and brown sheath – Hodson, p.52

Dancing mannikin, childlike face, pointed cap, coat, tights and pointed feet – Hodson, p.54

Tiny, elflike, inch or two high, wings, fleshy faces, tight fitting green garment Hodson, p.55

Lots of little people coming out of a mountain, sparkling lights coming from their bodies – Tame, 1999, p.11

Small man in green, round smiling face – Tame, p.13

Pink boys, blue thing under the bed, gnomes pulling faces – Tame, p.15

Little men in procession, millions of them, mostly 4 inches tall, fat, and thin – Tame, p.17

Five little creatures dancing, 18 inches high, greyish in colour, swollen bellies, nodding heads – Tame, p.23

Goblinessque figures appearing in a farmhouse – Tame, p.32

Tiny man in green cured a woman in the park – Tame, p.35

Figure, 18 inches tall, brown suit – Tame, p.38

Small creature, pointed hat, shaped like a flame – Tame, p.78

Family of crystal working gnomes – Tame, p.79

Brown skin, 3 feet high, black gowns with golden mesh, white linen caps – Bord, p.24

Male and female, red apparel similar to military uniform, reddish handkerchiefs with yellow spots on their heads, holding white handkerchiefs, child size – Bord, p.25

Little figures playing, vanished on closer observation – Bord, p.26

Little creatures dressed in green bathing in Ilkley Wells with their clothes on – Bord, p.27

Dwarf like man, in full hunting costume, top boots and spurs, green jacket, red hairy cap, hunting whip – Bord, p.28

Little wizened man, 18 – 2 feet high, pointed hat, doublet and short knickerbockers, blue and red, brown, and wrinkled face – Bord, p.34

Small child size figures in gaily coloured skirts with bare legs – Bord, p.39

Figures dressed in brown, 2 feet high, bright clothes with radiant faces – Bord, p.40

Figures dancing in the fog, dressed in sleeveless jerkin, tight-fitting trousers, two women wearing bonnets, shawls, and white dresses, disappeared on closer inspection – Bord, p.41

Small hairy man, 18 inches high, leathery face, sharp nose, long arms – Bord, p.42



Little old man, 3 feet tall, brown smock, tied with a cord, brown leggings, brown flat cap – Bord, p.43

Little man, grey all over, holding a ball of wool – Bord, p.45

Little figure, dressed in green, red jelly bag hat – Bord, p.45

Tiny, ugly mannikin, wrinkled and misshapen, 9 inches high – Bord, p.47

Strange grinning creature, 4-6 inches, large ear, glimmering green body – Bord, p.49

Little green man on an iris stalk, five inches high, merry face, red cap – Bord, p.50

Little old men, little green caps, neutral green clothes – Bord, p.51

Dumpy little chap four feet tall, pointed hat, clothes all the same colour as the grass – Bord, p.54

Sixty odd little men, half as tall as a child, long white beards with red tips, wrinkled faces, noddy caps with a bobble, blue tops, and yellow tights, they were in little cars – Bord, p.56

Little man in a tiny red car, 18 inches tall, white beard, red droopy pointed hat – Bord, p.57

Tiny plane flown by a tiny pilot who waved his hat – Bord, p.57

§1) two small creatures two-feet high sitting on a stump. Appeared to be carrying small canes and dressed in brown cloaks.

§2) there were a group of fey beings some very small others about the size of a child and others as large as myself walking with me. They appeared completely black like silhouettes some had wings and others didn't.

§3) I saw the fairy/elf, about eight- to ten-inches tall, lovely face, dressed in greens although I did not see any wings.’ ‘

§10) a carved wooden face with almond-shaped eyes.

§12) a small gnome-like man. Immediately I looked again but the entity had gone. From the brief glimpse I had I could see it was almost a cross between the classical description of brownies and a gnome. It can't have been more than six inches tall judging by the furniture I glimpsed it on. It had a scruffy dark brown or black beard which seemed to be spiky and covered most of its face. No brightly coloured clothes that I remember, they were all brown/dark.

§18) a gnome sitting by the side of the path. It was so unexpected; I think I remember feeling scared – or wondering if I was seeing things or going mad? I took another couple of steps, and I saw his nut-brown wizened face in detail. He was cheekily grinning at me. He had a mossy brown beard and dark brown shining eyes; he was wearing a peaked hat (brown) and a shiny jacket and trousers in shades of brown and ochre. I'd say he was about twelve- to fourteen-inches tall.

§22) a man running down the hill. When I say run, think of those dreams when the land flies beneath you with each step; he was moving like this over the heathy ground. He stopped and looked at us, and my husband waved. He grinned and waved back, then continued to run at this incredible pace in an easterly direction until he was out of sight. He was the same sort of height and build as a slim human, with shoulder-length hair which was the colour of haematite. It was a metallic dark grey. He wore olive green trousers and a long-sleeved top, but the cut was very unusual, not like anything that would be commonly bought in a shop. It had a hand-made look to it, with an odd style.

§25) 'Gnome like little men about two-foot-high working on clearing up foliage beneath the trees and chatting with each other. Small bright white balls of light moving above them from leaf to leaf.' 'Grey-streaked fair hair, lined elderly faces, beards. Green or red or brown long-sleeved tops with brown trousers and work boots. Flat brown caps. Twinkling bright eyes, blue or green or brown.'

§26) He is about three-foot tall with a dark beard and rather frightening so he must be a buck a du.

§27) I saw a brown leathery skinned, very angry looking old man, standing about two and a half feet high, completely naked apart from a loin cloth type clothing. He was pointing right at me with his index finger.

§32) a small, hooded figure. It was about two feet high, dressed in a long, dark coloured cloak, and bent slightly.

§37) 'Small men with lots of hair in brown suits, almost dirty looking (imagine miners) they always looked nasty.'

§39) a 'tree-man' walk slowly down the road 'Approximately seven-foot-tall slim tree-man figure judging from the height of the wall it would have been behind, seen from waist up only.

Haggard/wizened face seemed 'old.' Bark-like heavy grooved texture of body and face, long branch-like arms bent at the elbow area, unnaturally straight and thin arms, long hands. A few leaves scattered on the body and arms. 'Stumpy' branches from head (not tapering as branches do).'

§52) very small faces appear out of nowhere. The faces changed from happy to angry if you stare, they also approach you if you stare too much.

§54) A very large (twice human height) humanoid creature, which appeared to be made out of sticks, jumped out of a tree about thirty metres from me. He landed in a crouched position with one hand on the ground in front of him. He seemed to look at me for about five seconds, then jumped straight back up into the tree and sort of strode away, in the branches, 'Like a skeleton made out of sticks.'

§57) a tree rushing across fields towards us, I could see there was a friendly, smiling face in the bark. It was about ten feet tall.

§65) a small figure seated between the pots, about ten-inches high, its knees drawn up to its chest. It was green, had a pointed chin and large pointed ears.

§66) A man, dressed from head to foot in green, wearing a green hat.

§68) pale greenish skin, and pure white hair, they do not have knees, they seem to float in the reeds.

§69) a small group of water fae having a water fight and giggling to themselves.' 'Wings like dragonflies lower bodies like fish, upper body, and head humanlike.

§72) a procession of tiny semi-transparent figures walking along the forest floor.' 'Tiny, less than an inch high, semi-transparent/white.'

§74) a mix of a frog and a sparrow. When I got closer the little thing gave me a look of malice. I felt it was male. When he noticed I could see him he when [sic. when he was] invisible. Second time a stick lying by a road start to float and melt and took a shape of some winged creature.

§75) a tiny figure began climbing up the inside of the curtain. 'Probably a little smaller than my adult hand, I only saw it in silhouette, the clothing must have been fitted as I remember the

skinny legs well, unless the legs were bare. I think his hair was fairly short, and I think there was probably a hat, sort of pointy.

§77) a little man dressed in red climbing up the side of it. He ran across the chair arm and up onto the back of the chair. There he sat down and looked at me. He looked old in the face but not ancient, and he smoked a pipe but there was no smoke. 'Male, red jacket, tallish red hat. Face aged about fifty-ish. And had a pipe.'

§78) five small figures, very human like but much smaller. They were dressed in brown to dark green clothes – somewhat like tights with sturdy boots and smock like tops, their faces were more angular than human faces and very sun weathered in appearance. Very tiny human proportioned but slimmer than average. Slightly angular faces. Narrow eyes. Weathered faces.

§80) a sort of wicker-basket affair with a balloon on top came down by my side, but not landing on the garden path. Inside were some small people, but one older man dressed in grey trousers, I remember, a grey top hat and black jacket. He had silver hair, and it was curly and long, and the gist of it was that I was to 'go away with them.'

§86) a tall, thin ethereal figure pressed with his back against a tree.' 'I felt the fairy was in its home woodland – it felt part of the place.' 'Tall, thin, green.

§93) Like a tiny person. A red cap, red jacket, green leggings.

§94) voices coming from inside the box and these voices belonged to very tiny men – a bit like gnomes – who would come and go from the box.

§96) a figure, about three-feet high walking towards the car, peering in. He looked a [little] like a leprechaun, he had a lined face and beard, but he wore a black hooded cloak over a dark

coloured jacket and trousers. I remember he wore a wide black belt, and he was dragging a sack over his shoulder, which dragged along the ground.

§97) a creature like a person but stretched upwards, overly thin, and tall, and with its head coming to a slightly corkscrewed point with some smaller branching points coming from it. It had its back to me and was a mottled brown but wreathed in a glowing greenish mist that came from it and seemed to be part of it. Part of it stretched up from the shoulders forming something vaguely wing or fan-like in shape.

a small shiny white humanoid creature about eighteen inches high you couldn't see its face because it was too bright and shiny glowing white like a light bulb but shaped like a small person.

§106) a classic gnome type except for the hat, which was what looked like a flat cap made from dark brown leather. He was around two feet high, and his body and clothing were all dark brown and leathery.

§107) a small, grey-clothed figure about eighteen inches in height dressed in grey, thickset (or well wrapped?) and of a 'shambling' gait.

§108) An approximately two-foot-high figure appeared in the passageway in front of me. He had a very round face covered in minute wrinkles, a pointed conical hat of pure white material that looked like brushed wool, can't remember the clothes.

§109) four creatures, maybe twenty-five centimetres tall, humanoid, hairless, with spindly limbs and slightly shiny leathery skin. They wore nothing but Oxford commoners' gowns (no mortarboards). They were under some vegetation in a flower bed – rhubarb it might have been. They were smiley, fast- 88 moving, and very deliberately one put its finger to his mouth as if to tell me not to tell others around me.

§113A) a very short man, about three-feet high, pushing a little cart. He was dressed in a light/mid green two- or three-piece suit and wore a green hat.

§114) a procession. Around three feet tall. With lanterns. 'They looked medieval in dress. But clothes were covered by the mist at times.'

§116) Clinging to the tree trunk was a creature about the size of a man with a vaguely human face, webbed hands and feet, reptilian looking and with a damp froglike skin of a blue tinge.

§118) a small dwarf or goblin, covered in leaves and branches.

§119) a small man about a foot and half tall, dressed entirely in brown. He had a ruddy face and short breech like trousers (cut off at the knee) but no shoes. He was swinging around like a parallel bars gymnast and smiling.

§123) a very small person 'Elf?' about eight inches high with a green jacket and a small, pointed hat.

§125) little figures living in the stump and moving around the outside edges as if busy at their business. they were very small and pale.

§133A) a small (two to three foot) ugly 'creature' digging in the soil. 'Appearance of being old and very ugly.

Small misshapen figure, sharp features, bottle green clothes, conical hat with fur edging, knee boots, five feet tall. (Johnson, Ch. 1)

Funny little man. Log pointed cap, working in the beans. (Johnson, Ch. 1)

Little people, various coloured clothes, red jerkins, green breeches, yellow jerkins, mauve breeches, nine inches. (Johnson, Ch. 1)

Small figure, little man, 2.5 feet high, hairy face, long arms, very long pointed feet, mushroom coloured and shaped hat, dark brown/green clothes. (Johnson Ch. 1)

Small figure, nine inches, small head, very little hair, brownish skin, naked. Johnson, Ch. 1)

Little gnome, annoyed about a bit of rope around his tree. (Johnson, Ch. 1)

Two gnomes a foot high, green, and brown tunics, puckered faces, brought a gift of green tomatoes. (Johnson, Ch. 1)

A gnome holding a rake, pointed cap and little jacket and trousers, red and green. (Johnson, Ch. 1)

Half a dozen little men brown tights and jerkins, brown hats, dancing. (Johnson, Ch. 1)

Grass fairies, little men like blades of grass. (Johnson, Ch. 1)

Fairies and elves collecting dew drops (Johnson, Ch. 1)

Tiny man, brown cap, red coat, brown trousers. (Johnson, Ch. 1)

Small people, some green, some copper coloured. (Johnson, Ch. 1)

Little man in a tree. (Johnson, Ch. 1)

Little creature running across the floor. (Johnson, Ch. 1)

Small, brown creature peeping over a tree stump, eighteen inches high, prick eared. (Johnson, Ch. 1)

Six little people carrying a ladder across a lane. (Johnson, Ch. 1)

Little brown ball with a gnome inside. (Johnson, Ch. 1)



Gnomes in a tree, seven inches high, colourless clothes, jackets and trousers, hats. (Johnson, Ch. 1)

Elves swarming over the trunk of a tree. (Johnson, Ch. 1)

Figure like a very old man, knee breeches, height of a small child. Hat. Carrying something.  
(Johnson, Ch. 1)

Little man dressed in red. (Johnson, Ch. 1)

'I don't know, I don't know what I saw but I actually know in my mind I saw this little family of Pixies. They were in a hedgerow, walking up a lane in dappled sunshine and I did have to rub my eyes and thought, 'What?' They then turned into this family of grouse with a rustic colour and who knows if that was real or not,' Fern Britton, Cornwall Live, August 2021

### **Tiny, mostly female with wings**

Green and grey, grasshopper size – H&Y, p.26

Pearly looking beings flying around – H&Y, p.79

Short petticoat dresses, and feminine aspect – H&Y, p.81

4-5 inches tall, similar to human women, nude, long streaming hair, garland of flowers around forehead – Hodson, p.60

Female, nude, no wings, four feet high, silvery white skin, gold stars around the head – Hodson, p.61

Intelligent, wings, beautiful, pale, rose pink fair and shining hair, large, luminous eyes, rainbow aura – Hodson, p.64

Golden fairy, fair, golden aura, golden wings – Hodson, p.74

Nature spirits, 4-6 inches, male and female, soft, dreamy eyes, smiling, females have bright coloured long dresses, males dressed in royal blue silk, like cavalier period – Hodson, p.76

Soft and gentle fairies, flimsy garment, pale pink and white skin, long hair, garland of tiny lights – Hodson, p.77

Tree fairy, 3-4 feet high, transparent, filmy robe, cloudlike aura, friendly smile – Hodson, p. 77

Group of fairies flying around a meadow, female, dressed in white or pale pink, sheeny material, clingy, bare limbs, oval elongated wings – Hodson, p.78

Pale blue fairies playing by a stream, oval fluttery wings, some have a girdle with a horn hanging from it, six inches high, varying shades of brown hair – Hodson, p.80

Dancing fairies, two feet high, star on forehead, large pinky lavender wings, golden brown hair, wand – Hodson, p.81

Small figures dancing on the water, sound of the beating of wings, flowing and graceful, silver, blue and grey – Tame, Real Fairies, 1999, p.9

Fairies in green dancing in a ring – Tame, p.30

Female, six inches high, in the centre of a rose, colourful dragonfly wings, little wand, pale pink skin, silvery hair – Tame, p.37

Emerald green fairies – Tame, p.45

Turquoise blue water fairies – Tame, p.45

Fairies dancing in a ring, three feet high, sparkling dresses, light, and shadowy, not solid bodies  
– Bord, p.28

Fairies in light draperies, floating among the flowers – Bord, p.51

Greenish, light, and airy figure, 12-18 inches, misty and leaflike with rose petal draperies – Bord,  
p.53

§5A) ‘Human shaped with insect wings.’

§11) two silvery people (no bigger than ten centimetres) darting about and chasing each other a couple of meters above the corn. They seemed to have a human shape, and a circular shaped blur around them, which I assumed were wings.

§13) I noticed a twinkling light in my window. I watched the light fly down towards my neck region. As the light came closer, I noticed it had a human face and a dark outfit. It was around two-inches tall.

§14) a fairy about the size of my thumb wearing a green dress. She was stood in a plant.’ ‘About the length of my thumb. Human figure. Green dress looked like it was made of leaves. Clear wings.’ ‘It looked like a fairy.’

§15) the most beautiful fairy, about six inches tall, iridescent with a crown too (I had never believed in fairies).

§16) a smallish body with a head and hair. It had see through wings bigger than a butterflies but smaller than a dragonfly.

§17) ‘I saw a pink fairy in sunshine about ten- to twelve-centimetres high flying out of the window, wings not very high, rounded. Pink dress. Did not notice feet.

§20) 'I saw a fairy on the top of a cliff but only a fleeting glimpse of wings.' 'Iridescent colourful wings.'

§21) I watched a creature in the hedgerow at the side of the road hovering around the blackberries. It was about two inches in height; it had thin wings like a crane fly and a very slim upright body with two long legs and larger feet. I did not see arms, but the creature had what looked like a raggedy skirt on. It was orangey brown in colour.

§23) 'Something about three-inches tall went to free it there was nothing there and nothing around the house that could have been it. Cannot describe as the light it gave off was so bright.'

§24) Something about two-feet tall, white, and willowy, floaty jumped out of the hedgerow in front of our car then disappeared.'

§31) a small fairy being flying into the bushes Small glittery looking with small wings and very graceful.'

§33) Like a Sindy doll with clothes that looked to be made from natural things like leaves. It was the same size as the doll but thinner, more ethereal.'

Three fairies in a group. They moved up, down left and right. All were quite bright, and I could clearly see their outline complete with wings.

§35). A ball of light appeared from the bathroom door and started to move horizontal and evenly. Inside was a female form, with long hair with beautiful wings, the colour was ivory/white and effervescent. She was not solid she was made of tiny, tiny stars you could see through her.

§40) 'The fairy fell from the tree as a leaf. Small, large wing, pretty.'

a pink faerie rise out of the flower, with what looked like several orbs each side of the flower with elves in them. They all rose up together. The faerie was pink.

§43) pulled a weed out and small glowing beings flew out. One flew up and hovered in front of my face for a very brief moment. Had wings like a dragonfly and limbs. It was in an upright position. They were glowing.

§45A) The fairy appeared flitting in front of the television screen.

§46) something humanoid, winged, greenish, about four- to six-inches tall, it climbed between the thin branches of a weeping ash tree

§47) 'A small shape flew by at my school. It had small wings and was pale blue coloured. It was only there for a couple of seconds before it disappeared.

§50) a fairy was floating out of the bush. Couldn't see any wings but it seemed to be floating still and then towards us. It didn't seem friendly.' 'About four to five inches tall. Don't remember seeing hair. Looked like it had shimmering light around its feet. It looked angry, as if it resented us being there.'

§53) a small, slightly darkly coloured creature coming out of the rush. It had a sort of limp and only one big wing on the back of its body, which was black. light body, small head, and big ears. Arms weren't visible but legs were very short. Slightly dark aroma [aura?] around the fairy and it moved slowly.' 'Light, airy. Almost like bells but more high pitched and fast.'

§55) a bronze-winged creature appeared and fluttered in front of us then flew away, in a guise similar to a dragonfly but it was bronze and seemed humanoid but had very long limbs. He – as I felt he was a he – was approximately six to seven inches in length.

§56) an amorphous greyish shape on the ground about a hundred metres ahead. We thought it may have been a large dog, or possibly a deer. It shuffled under one of the large lower branches of a beech tree. It then morphed into the branch and emerged again. It had become two female figures. Each about three and a half to four feet tall. They both had long flowing dresses on and wings on their backs. One with long blonde hair, one with long black hair. They both had a pair of insect like wings and were pretty.’ ‘Their laughter was felt in my whole being. Like a babbling brook or rustling leaves or tinkling bells.’

§59) A twinkly light flew from one side of the room to the other, across the window. I could see the body of the fairy, its head (although I couldn’t make out a face), wings and legs.’ ‘Small (perhaps about five-ten centimetres tall); twinkly white light, head, legs, wings.’

§60) the fairy came to me. She was beautiful dressed in yellow her wings were also yellow.

§61) a band of fairy creatures flew in through my open bedroom window and danced along my duvet by my face. I was wide awake and both fascinated and scared, these fairies were nothing like the Enid-Blyton and Tinker Bell-style that I’d seen in books, they did have wings (barely visible and white/grey) very long thin limbs and feet.

§62a) Creature flew onto windscreen of car both driver and passenger in front saw it! Both said Tiny but clear to see humanoid winged creature [as?] it flew off!

§63) a busy group of fairies in the flower/herb borders in garden, watching from patio they also saw me. Full daylight in the summer holiday. After noticed fairy rings on the lawn, they were often there.’ ‘Like tiny men and women had wings, hovered rather than flew.’ ‘They are partial to chocolate.’

§67) The fairy creature was about the size of a grown-up’s hand. Her wings were a pale lilac and folded across the front of her body which looked like she wore a long dress.

§71) it was silver, sparkling, had only four limbs and had a face resembling that of a human, then it flew away.’ ‘Very small, silver in colour and it was also sparking.’ ‘It looked like a tiny human that could fly; its face resembled that of some fairies that I’ve seen in pictures/paintings.’

§76) a small, winged person flew slowly by ‘She was a tiny little delicate little thing with wings.’

§79) a fairy hovering.’ ‘Human like with wings, with an aura round it.’

§81A) five or six tiny fairies dressed in brown playing.

§82i) Around fifty or sixty little dryads staring down from the leafy boughs staring at me. They were almost camouflaged by the trees. They had kind little faces and were scurrying around trying to get a better look at us.

ii) A little ball of light whizz past the window. Ten there were several other little orbs of glowing light. They were around the size of tennis balls, and on closer inspection you could see the outline of spindly little bodies glowing.

§83) tiny wings and a tiny body. It was moving, flying outwards from the tree. Light blue wings, short brown hair. The size of a child’s pinkie finger.

§88) a body flitted by about two metres from my head, like a very large butterfly but with a long tail which had some sort of detail at the end. It moved in a series of ‘U’ shaped movements.

§91) a fairy.

§92) a small fairy with a face, wings and body wearing the colour orange. For a few seconds.’

‘Female with the colour orange on.

§98) a fairy flying above a stream outside a National Trust-type property we were visiting. It glowed brightly, and clearly had wings, arms and legs.

§99) lots of tiny fairies dancing on the 'Small with wings and bright clothing.'

§100) a female figure in a black flowery dress with dark grey hair and dark skin.

§101) a small bright object about the size and shape of a dragonfly caught my eye about half a metre away just above head height. As I looked, I realised it was flying upright and not horizontal as dragonflies do. It was a pure white light with a slight blue in the centre.

§111) Fairies About six inches tall with sparkly lacy dresses. Very pretty.'

§112) three little beings. One on the left was seemingly painting the face of the one on the right. Her face was in profile and she then turned round and faced me; she had big green leaves where her forehead was and a small, pointed face with a small nose. Her face was white and she had what looked like eye liner around her eyes, they were small and dark.

§115) fairies and elves and music, between six and twelve inches but very hard to judge and their skin was quite leathery which gave them a very ancient quality. Both dressed very delicately, the fairy had very fine wings like a daddy longlegs.

§118) Two beautiful, lithe, otherworldly, females appeared, and were dancing facing each other, smiling and laughing.

§121 a small number of them, all winged. Some sitting on branches some hovering. The wings were like butterfly wings.

§122) a classic Tinker Bell fairy hovering over the middle of the road. All white clothing and seeming to have a faint glow.



§124) a faery face. A faery then flew out of the video in a shower of green light and flew round the room. Behind it was another which also flew out followed by more. They were all lining up one behind the other and came out in single file. There was also a large female faery in a purple dress. She was kneeling in front of the TV.

§126) a winged small figure all white, a head wings, what looks like a dress.

§135) a tiny human being with wings. Very small and slim, can't remember clothing but no shoes. Hair in two plaits.

§137) little figure with wings, legs and a body etc.

§139) a very small insect creature which hovered examining me. I am aware it isn't an insect from its more human body language.

§140) a fairy sitting on a plant in garden.' 'Wings like butterflies but much too big to be a butterfly.

Beautiful delicate fairy, lace like. (Johnson, Ch. 1)

Female fairy, delicate blue surrounded by tinkerbelle light, glowing like a star. (Johnson, Ch. 1)

Gossamer winged fairy tending flowers. (Johnson, Ch. 1)

Fairy flying upwards slowly knee-length dress, sparkling gauze like material, pastel wings.  
(Johnson, Ch. 1)

Fairy 9-12 inches tall, clinging to the head of a dahlia. (Johnson, Ch. 1)

Fairy, 8 inches high, large, gauzy wings, flying, surrounded by gauzy glow. (Johnson, Ch. 1)

Winged creature, one foot high, carrying a mushroom or egg, wings were blue/silver (Johnson, Ch. 1)

Seven little people, 8 inches tall, long flowing hair, pastel dresses. (Johnson, Ch. 1)

Winged, dark hair, brown, green, lemon dresses, as tall as primroses. (Johnson Ch. 1)

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