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# Journeys into the Unknown: Fairy Figures as Catalysts of Mortal Motion

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# Fairy Figures as Catalysts of Mortal Motion

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# Introduction

It is a long-standing idea, both in folklore and more recently in the genre of fantasy, that Names, capital N, have power. When you know something's true Name you have power over it, can bend it to your will. While this may not function in the same magical sense in our world (I will not say the 'real world', for just because something is not fact does not make it unreal), nevertheless it remains true that words and names have a great deal of power. Annalisa Castaldo, in her essay "No More Yielding Than A Dream: Shakespeare in 'The Sandman'" writes that, "Shakespeare wears well, in part, because he can be accessorized. Culture can keep reinventing Shakespeare to suit its needs, all the while pretending nothing has changed."[1] This is because the name, the word Shakespeare, as belonging to a prominent member, if not the leader, of the Western Canon for the last four hundred years, brings to mind a specific set of images, impressions, and feelings. These impressions are unique to Shakespeare, and any other name or word would not, could not, conjure the same mental mark. Thus any author, by evoking the name of Shakespeare in a character, immediately presents the reader with a foundational image, an outline if you will, of that character. The author is free to color things in, to shade, as he sees fit, especially when factual details are scarce, but the outline remains the same.

The longer something persists in the collective living memory, the stronger its Name, and the mental outline that name evokes, becomes. Tolkien writes, "The radical distinction between all art (including drama) that offers a visible presentation and true literature is that it imposes one visible form. Literature works from mind to mind and is thus more progenitive. It is at once

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[1] Castaldo, Annalisa, "'No More Yielding than a Dream': The Construction of Shakespeare in 'The Sandman.'" *College Literature*, Vol. 31, No. 4, Shakespeare and Popular Culture (Fall, 2004), p. 95

more universal and more poignantly particular. If it speaks of bread or wine or stone or tree, it appeals to the whole of these things, to their ideas;"[2]. This is indeed true, but the power of Naming fails to live up to its potential if one thinks of it only in terms of stones and trees; common-place things, things both physically real and not of man's creation. While it is true that my outline for 'stone' is not the same as someone else's, the two can only differ so much because their basis in immutable fact is so strong. The true power of Names, as I have described it, lies in constructed outlines with little to no basis in reality. Details of Shakespeare's life are sparse at best, but nevertheless the invocation of the name, of the character, brings to mind a distinct feeling.

Shakespeare, however, did exist; he lived, he wrote, ate, drank, slept, breathed. What of a being that does none of these things, but has scattered itself across the Western canon, had its name and outline conjured into readers' minds time and time again for six hundred years and more? I am speaking, of course, of fairies; fairies, which have no basis in the factual world, no biographical details or concrete physical attributes. Nevertheless, the word carries with it a powerful outline. But has that outline always been the same? And what purpose, once invoked, do these fairies serve? As beings with no physical form they must, one imagines, perform some function in literature in order to be called up as they are, again and again.

Often in modern times when people think of fairies, the first image that comes to mind bears a strong resemblance to J.M. Barrie's creation Tinkerbell, the tiny, butterfly-winged companion of the titular character from his beloved work, *Peter Pan*. And while Tinkerbell was hardly the first miniature, winged fairy in literature to enjoy the company of humans, she is far

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[2] Tolkien, J. R. R. "On Fairy Stories." *The Monsters and the Critics: The Essays of J.R.R. Tolkien*. London: HarperCollins, 1997. Print. p. 159

from the quintessential fairy, and bears almost no resemblance whatsoever to the beings that bore the same name four- or five-hundred years before her time. Fairies of the Middle Ages were an altogether different brood; fierce, mysterious and secretive, and above all not to be trifled with. Barrie's iconic creation and her ilk have as much to do with these beings as a bird does a dinosaur: there is a tenuous lineal connection, but unless one were to trace the evolution of the thing one would never believe the two had ever been related.

How is it, then, that the same name can be applied to both? Because, in their simplest form, literary fairies perform much the same function from century to century: they serve as physical agents of the greater concept of the unknown, acting to draw the human characters of their story away from the known world, from the spaces on the map that have been charted, and into that wilderness that is yet unknown. Diane Purkiss writes in her book on fairies, *At the Bottom of the Garden*, that "Fairies are born of...fear. The blank spaces on the village map, too, need to be filled; faced with woods and mountains, seas and streams that could never be fully charted, human beings saw blanks, blanks they hastened to fill with a variety of beings all given different names, yet all recognizable as fairies."[3] I posit that every change the fairy undergoes in literature, and there have been many changes, is one which better enables them to fulfill their function in the face of changing heroes. After all, a man of the 21st century, or the 19th, cannot be expected to have the same reactions as one of the 14th. Fairies change because we change, and every change they undergo allows them to continue to play their role, pulling us out and away, for whatever reason, from the things we know.

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[3] Purkiss, Diana. *At the Bottom of the Garden: A History of Fairies, Hobgoblins and Other Troublesome Things*. New York, NY: New York University Press, 2001. Print. p. 11

# Chapter 1

In order to better understand the process of fairy evolution, so to speak, we must first examine what literary evidence we have of fairies from the Middle Ages. Fairies in writing from this era, however are more elusive than their Victorian descendants, if only because extant written works grow scarcer the farther into antiquity one delves. Many of the manuscripts from the era are incomplete, or exist only in one extant copy, or survive only through oral tradition. Unlike many of their more modern contemporaries, fairies from the Middle Ages were not merely the idle dream of a novelist; they were inextricably linked to folklore, and this makes them difficult to trace and harder to pin down. But fortunately we are left with a handful of works intact (or nearly so), dating roughly to the 13th and early 14th centuries, which feature fairies in prominent roles. It is to these that we now turn in our study of medieval fairies. Of the works that remain in the present day we will examine three of the best known and most studied: *Sir Orfeo,* a Middle English poem re-telling the Greek Orpheus myth in the form of a romance; *Tam Lin*, a ballad of the Scottish borderlands most famously transcribed in more than a dozen variants by Francis James Child in the 19th century; and last and perhaps best-known and most studied, *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, a Middle English romance believed to have been written around the late 14th century by an anonymous poet.

Each of these stories has a number of elements in common with the others, chief among them being a mortal protagonist and a fairy antagonist. Each begins in some way with an interaction between the two, initiated by the fairy antagonist. This provokes a response from the hero which, most importantly, leads him (or her, in the case of *Tam Lin*) away from the civilized

world and into the unknown wilds. Here he has a confrontation of some sort with the fairy antagonist who we see to be strikingly similar in various ways to the protagonist himself, as well as living in a world which bears a strong resemblance to the world of the protagonist. However, this resemblance is always slightly skewed, somehow *off*, like a reflection in a mirror; at first glance it is identical, but upon closer inspection it proves to be backwards. These subtle differences evoke the concept which Freud referred as "das unheimliche" or "the uncanny" in his seminal essay of the same name. Freud describes the uncanny as "that class of the terrifying which leads back to something long known to us, once very familiar."[4] Of course, Freud also states that uncanniness cannot be applied to fairy stories in the same way it can to realism. This, however, though Freud himself fails to say as much, is because the examples Freud cites of instances which would ordinarily produce an uncanny effect (the resurrection of the dead, the animation of inanimate objects, instantaneous wish fulfillment, etc) are facilitated in fairy tales via a willing suspension of disbelief on the part of the reader; because there is a basic assumption that such things are possible in fairy-tales, when they do take place the effect it produces is not uncanny. This is not the case in the medieval fairy stories (which is to say stories involving fairies) which this chapter proposes to discuss. Everything about the treatment of fairies and their magic in these texts, as we will see, suggests that the human characters are thoroughly taken aback by it. Of equal interest to us is something which Freud passes over rather quickly, however: the literal translation of the German word *unheimlich*. *Unheimlich* means "not of the home", and these fairies most certainly are not. They are, at their core, personifications of that

[4] Freud, Sigmund. (1919h). Das Unheimliche. *Imago*, 5: 297-324; *GW*, 12: 229-268; The "uncanny," *SE*, 17: 217-256

wild unknown mentioned above; of darkness, madness, death, and above all of Nature.[5] In the medieval texts of this chapter there is a certain sense of being surrounded by uncharted wilderness, unknown and unknowable. The protagonists's purpose, once he is engaged by the fairy adversary, is to defend against an incursion by that wildness into the civilised world; likewise, the purpose of the fairy element is to draw the mortal protagonist away from the man-made world of court, castle, and chivalry and into the wilderness. In all three texts the world of the protagonist is encroached upon by the fairy element, causing the protagonist to leave said world and enter the unknown in order to defend against it. Ultimately this does not make the wilderness knowable, it merely makes it manageable. These medieval protagonists do not seek to understand the unknown, only to defeat it. However, to this end it must be given an embodiment, a face, so to speak, and I posit that it is for this reason that the fairy element in medieval texts so strongly resembles its mortal counterpart. The heroes have given it the face they know best: their own. This veneer of similarity, however, is inescapably underlain by the knowledge of otherness, and it is these two aspects that produce the uncanny effect of medieval fairies. In order to better understand this we will examine the aforementioned texts, beginning with the earliest, *Sir Orfeo*, found in the Auchinleck Manuscript which has been dated to circa 1330 AD.

*Orfeo* tells the story of a king, the titular character, who loves two things: harp music and his wife, Heurodys. When the queen is kidnapped by the Fairy King, Orfeo, unable to bear his failure to protect his wife, leaves his kingdom in self-imposed exile and enters the wilderness. There he eventually happens upon the fairy retinue and follows it back to Faerie, where he plays

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[5] Purkiss, Diane. *At the Bottom of the Garden: A Dark History of Fairies, Hobgoblins, and Other Troublesome Things*. New York: New York UP, 2005. Print.

his harp for the king so beautifully that the fairy grants him a boon, which Orfeo uses to reclaim his queen and return home. Already in this brief summary we can see similarities between the humans and the fairies, but in order to fully appreciate them we must look in more depth.

One of the most significant recurring themes in *Sir Orfeo* is the similarity not just of fairies to humans, but of the Fairy King to Orfeo, the mortal king. The fairies in the poem enjoy many of the same pastimes as their human royal counterparts, something we see clearly in these two characters. In the very beginning, the poet writes of Orfeo,

> Orfeo mest of ani thing
> Lovede the gle of harping.
> Siker was everi gode harpour
> Of him to have miche honour.[6]

Not only does he provide hospitality but specifically honour as well, showing both love and respect for the minstrel's trade. We see this hospitality mirrored at the climax of the story, when Orfeo begs the minstrel's right of audience with the Fairy King and is ultimately rewarded for his skill, just as Orfeo himself would reward a wandering harp player who might appear in his court. The more telling similarities, though, are in the appearances of the fairy court, first in Queen Heurodys' dream, and then on several separate occasions in the real world.

When Heurodys awakes from her dream, maddened with fear, the whole court is put into an uproar. Specific mention is made of numbers of people. Sixty maidens or more come to her aid; Orfeo arrives with ten knights. In Heurodys' dream she is approached first by two fair knights, fully armed, who insist that she accompany them to see their king. She refuses, and

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[6] Laskaya, Anne, and Eve Salisbury, eds. "Sir Orfeo." Teams Middle English Texts Series. University of Rochester, n.d. Web. 28 Apr. 2013. vv. 25-28. (Orfeo most of any thing loved the sound of harp music. Any good harper who came to his court was sure to be treated well). Please forgive my inelegant translations of the Middle English.

shortly afterwards the Fairy King himself arrives with a retinue of one hundred knights and one hundred maidens, all riding snow white horses.[7]

Among the various details one important thing to note is the size of the Fairy King's retinue. The Fairy King is able to casually summon up one hundred maidens and knights just to speak with the queen, more than Orfeo has been shown to possess heretofore. This establishes the beginning of a pattern of oneupmanship, in which the Fairy King's power and wealth are ultimately shown to be greater than those of mortals. Once Heurodys has delivered the fairy's message, however, Orfeo sets a guard about her of a full thousand knights, proving that he has might to equal that of the Fairy King[8]. Later on, after Orfeo's thousand knights are powerless to stop the Fairy King from kidnapping the queen, Orfeo in his self-imposed exile encounters the Fairy King and court firsthand.

> Other while he might him se
> As a gret ost bi him te,
> Wele atourned, ten hundred knightes,
> Ich y-armed to his rightes,
> Of cuntenaunce stout and fers,
> With mani desplaid baners.[9]

The Fairy King rides to war with a thousand fully-armed knights (which raises some interesting questions in itself. Against whom does the King of Faerie ride to war?), the exact size of the guard which Orfeo places around Heurodys before her capture. This, and all the appearances of the Fairy King's court, are a clear and deliberate measure of his power by a mortal standard. This allows the Fairy King's power to be gauged by a metric which Orfeo can understand, and one

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[7] "Sir Orfeo", vv. 135-145.

[8] "Sir Orfeo", vv. 180-184

[9] "Sir Orfeo", vv. 289-294. (Other times he might see a great host of a thousand knights, well-armed, of countenance stout and fierce, riding with banners as if to war.)

which applies to him as well. In theory, if fairies were possessed of supernatural powers, one might imagine that they would not need strength in numbers; however, because Orfeo's men do not have magical abilities, neither does the fairy host. This is yet another instance in which the king of the Otherworld mirrors Orfeo, the mortal king, specifically in numbers of people listed. Whenever a number of either maidens or knights is given in reference to one of the courts, it is used again later for the retinue of the other. Orfeo places a thousand-knight guard on Heurodys[10]; the Fairy King rides to war with a thousand-knight army[11]. When Heurodys awakes distraught from her dream she is immediately attended by sixty maidens[12]; the fairy hawking company that Orfeo encounters in the wood is composed of sixty maidens[13].

In addition to the size of the fairies' retinue, they share certain pastimes and hobbies with the human elites of the time, the courtly nobles. During his decade of self-imposed exile, Orfeo witnesses the fairies several times, not only going to war but also enjoying themselves. He witnesses fairy knights and ladies dancing and making music on pipes[14], sees the Fairy King out on a hunt with hounds and a hunting party[15], and finally happens to encounter a group of fairy maidens, among them his own queen, out hawking for sport, hunting water fowl.[16]

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[10] "Sir Orfeo", vv. 182-184

[11] "Sir Orfeo", vv. 289-292

[12] "Sir Orfeo", v. 90

[13] "Sir Orfeo", v. 304. Note: While it is true that the text gives the number of maidens as "sexti and mo", meaning that there could have been more than sixty. As the story is fictional there is no 'true' number of maidens, therefore the real significance lies in the numbers given by the author and their repetition.

[14] "Sir Orfeo", vv. 297-303

[15] "Sir Orfeo", vv. 283-286

[16] "Sir Orfeo", vv. 304-309

The fairies Orfeo happens upon, when not at war, enjoy spending their time making music, dancing, and hunting, much like the medieval mortal nobility.[17] When describing the fairy revels that Orfeo happens to encounter the author specifically states that there was present "al maner menstracy"[18], which is to say all manner of minstrelsy. The use of the word minstrelsy is a telling one, as the minstrel's art is important to the plot as well as being shown and stated to be a passion of both Orfeo and the Fairy King. The presence of "menstracy" in the fairy revels serves to reinforce yet again the parallels between the two monarchs, but all of these activities can be safely assumed to be activities in which Orfeo himself would partake in his free time. In general, fairies of the Fairy King's court, presumably nobles themselves, seem to take pleasure in all of the same activities that please their mortal equivalents. They are not portrayed as alien, supernatural monsters, but rather they mirror the human nobility. There are the parallels in number of knights and maidens, a shared appreciation for minstrelsy and harp music, but perhaps most importantly, Orfeo and the Fairy King desire the same woman. It is stated early on in the poem that Heurodys is not just Orfeo's queen but his true love and a source of great joy for him. In the aftermath of Heurodys' vision, Orfeo is informed of the situation and goes to his queen's chamber to ask her what has upset her so. At length, she answers.

> 'Allas, mi lord, Sir Orfeo!
> Sethen we first togider were,
> Ones wroth never we nere;
> Bot ever ich have yloved the
> As mi liif and so thou me;
> Ac now we mot delen ato;
> Do thi best, for y mot go.'
> 'Allas!' quath he, 'Forlorn icham!

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[17] Coulton, G.G. *Social Life in Britain from the Conquest to the Reformation*. London: Cambridge University Press, 1918. 395-96, 404, 409. Print.

[18] "Sir Orfeo", v. 302

Whider wiltow go, and to wham?
Whider thou gost, ichil with the,
And whider y go, thou schalt with me.'[19].

Heurodys is preparing to tell Orfeo of her vision in which the Fairy King assured her that he would come to take her the next day. She paints a picture of an enduring and loving marriage, saying that since they were first together they have never once been angry with each other, no small accomplishment. Orfeo, in turn, is deeply grieved by the prospect of losing his wife. Rather than dismiss the idea that she will be forced to leave and promise to place her under heavy guard, Orfeo pledges that wherever she goes he will go with her, despite the fact that his duties as king would, in theory, keep him at home; in this way he demonstrates that his first loyalty is to his queen, above even that which he bears for his kingdom. Orfeo demonstrates that Heurodys is the single most important thing in his life, as we see again later when she is kidnapped and he places himself in exile. After Heurodys gives Orfeo an account of her dream, he laments,

'O we!' quath he, 'Allas, allas!
Lever me were to lete mi liif
Than thus to lese the quen, mi wiif!'[20]

However, for all the similarities between the two monarchs and their respective courts, the ultimate impression that the Fairy King conveys is one distinctly inhuman and otherworldly. The centerpiece of this otherness lies in what Orfeo first sees when he enters the courtyard of the fairy palace. After being granted admission as a minstrel, Orfeo enters the palace courtyard and

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[19] "Sir Orfeo", vv. 120-130. (Alas, my lord Sir Orfeo! Since we were first together we have never once fought but ever have I loved thee, and on my life you have loved me. And now we must part; do your best, for I must go. 'Alas,' quoth he, 'I am forlorn! Where will you go, and to whom? Wherever thou go, I shall go with thee, and wherever I go you shall be with me.')

[20] "Sir Orfeo", vv. 176-178. (Oh woe, quoth he, alas alas! I would rather lose my life than thus to lose my queen, my wife!)

comes upon a gruesome and disturbing sight which contrasts sharply with the beautiful image of Fairies and their country which the story has painted so far.

> Then he gan bihold about al,
> And seighe liggeand within the wal
> Of folk that were thider y-brought
> And thought dede, and nare nought.
> Sum stode withouten hade,
> And sum non armes nade,
> And sum thurth the bodi hadde wounde,
> And sum lay wode, y-bounde,
> And sum armed on hors sete,
> And sum astrangled as thai ete;
> And sum were in water adreynt,
> And sum with fire al forschreynt.
> Wives ther lay on child bedde,
> Sum ded and sum awedde,
> And wonder fele ther lay bisides
> Right as thai slepe her undertides;
> Eche was thus in this warld y-nome,
> With fairi thider y-come. [21].

The courtyard is full of dead. Not just the dead, but those who have died violently, suddenly, and unexpectedly. Men who have been maimed or decapitated, who fell from their horses and broke their necks, who drowned or burned or choked to death. In a standard medieval castle one of the primary purposes of the courtyard would have been to shelter the people of the surrounding villages; in times of war, these people would flee their homes with their belongings, livestock, etc. and seek safety within the walls of the castle in order to stay alive. This provides a fascinating, if extra-textual (at no point do we actually see villagers sheltering in Orfeo's castle),

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[21] "Sir Orfeo", vv. 387-404. (Then he beheld all about within the wall folk that had been brought there, who had been thought dead. Some stood without head, some without arms, some with mortal wounds, some armed on horseback, some choked at their meals, some drowned and some burned to death. Wives on their birthing beds lay there, some dead and some driven mad. Wondrous many were taken here by fairy enchantment.)

contrast, as the courtyard of the Fairy King is filled not with the living, but with the dead, and specifically with the slain, those whose defenses failed to protect them in life. These dead, considered to have been taken before their time, are traditionally in the domain of the fairies, and lying in their midst, asleep under the ympe-tre (a grafted apple tree with magical significance[22]), is Heurodys.[23] These men are not, as one might assume, enemies killed in the midst of an attack on the fairy castle; it is specifically stated that they have been brought there by enchantment, "with fairi thider y-come". This line and the fact that Heurodys, who is not dead but kidnapped by the Fairy King, place the courtyard in an entirely different light. These men appear to be prizes or trophies, brought to Faerie, like Heurodys, by enchantment. This juxtaposition suggests that it pleases the Fairy King to have a courtyard full of these dead, much as it pleases him to have a beautiful woman taken in the same fashion. The presence of these dead is never brought up again in the poem. It lurks in the background during Orfeo's entire stay in the fairy palace, a place which in all other respects is one of beauty and opulence. The fairy country itself is described as being "As bright so sonne on somers day"[24] or as bright as sun on a summer's day, and the castle is described as having an outer wall "clere and schine as cristal;"[25]. This shining splendour stands as a stark contrast to the fairy courtyard full of sudden, violent death, and can be seen to represent the failure of Orfeo's reflection (the similarities between fairy and mortal) to

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[22] Jirsa, Curtis. "In the Shadow of the Ympe-tre: Arboreal Folklore in Sir Orfeo." *English Studies*. 89.2 (2008): 141-151. *JSTOR*. Web.

[23] K. M. Briggs, "The Fairies and the Realms of the Dead". *Folklore*, Vol. 81, No. 2 (Summer, 1970), pp. 81-96. *JSTOR*. Web.

[24] "Sir Orfeo", v. 352. (As bright as sun on a summer's day.)

[25] "Sir Orfeo", v. 358. (Clear and shining as crystal.)

completely cover the underlying truth of the savage unknown that is the Fairy King and his realm.

A less dramatic but also significant moment between Orfeo and his fairy counterpart can be seen in the climax of the poem. Orfeo, having played for the Fairy King and been granted a boon, requests that he be given "That ich levedi, bright on ble,/That slepeth under the ympe-tree."[26] The Fairy King is initially unwilling to give her up, saying:

> 'Nay!' quath the king, 'that nought nere!
> A sori couple of you it were,
> For thou art lene, rowe and blac,
> And sche is lovesum, withouten lac;
> A lothlich thing it were, forthi,
> To sen hir in thi compayni.'[27]

The king's objection to surrendering the queen is a purely aesthetic one. He demonstrates no emotional interest in Heurodys, but objects to relinquishing someone as beautiful as she to someone as ugly as Orfeo has become during his decade in the wild. In contrast, Orfeo's dialogue with Heurodys, as well as his self-imposed exile after her kidnapping, suggest a genuine love and emotional attachment to his queen. This emphasizes the impression of the Fairy King as a darker mirror of Orfeo; he desires Heurodys, just as Orfeo desires her, but only in a superficial way. This difference marks the majority of the parallels between the two kings. Just as the Fairy King wants Heurodys but does not love her, so he, his people and his land appear at first to be like Orfeo and his, but the similarity is only skin-deep.

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[26] "Sir Orfeo", vv. 455-56. (That lady with the beautiful skin, that sleeps under the ympe-tree)

[27] "Sir Orfeo", vv. 457-462 (No, quoth the king, that should not be! You would be a sorry couple, for you are thin, ragged and dirty, and she is flawless and lovely; a loathely thing, therefore it wre, to send her forth in your company.)

This is because, beneath the veneer of similarity to mortals and their world the fairies, and in particular the country of Faerie itself, demonstrate a strong connection to nature and the land, as well as something of an antipathy towards the civilised world and its trappings. Take, for instance, the first contact between fairies and mortals in the poem. The Fairy King comes to Heurodys in a dream while she sleeps. However, she is not asleep in her bed in the castle, nor even anywhere in Traciens, her city; the Fairy King comes to her only once she has left the city and fallen asleep beneath a tree. The Fairy King and his lands, in turn, are deeply natural in their description. The Fairy King in Heurodys' dream wears a crown of some unknown shining crystal,[28] as opposed to gold or silver which, like all metals, can be worked, cast, and molded into new shapes through human skill. Similarly, when Orfeo ultimately arrives at the Fairy King's castle he finds that the entire outer wall is made, not of rough-hewn blocks of stone, but of solid crystal.[29] Small crystals can be cut into shape, but a solid castle wall of crystal could only have grown into place naturally.

Just as the Fairy King and his country are deeply rooted in nature, so Orfeo is incompatible with them as long as he continues to bear the trappings of civilisation. He surrenders not only his kingdom but his shoes, his clothing, and the company of all other human beings. [30] He strips himself of all vestiges of the civilised, human world, and even then he must spend ten years in the forest before he can enter Faerie. The text takes great pains to show how he has given up these things.

He that hadde y-werd the fowe and griis,

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[28] "Sir Orfeo", vv. 149-52

[29] "Sir Orfeo", vv. 355-60

[30] "Sir Orfeo", vv. 227-33

And on bed the purper biis,
Now on hard hethe he lith,
With leves and gresse he him writh.
He that hadde had castels and tours…
Now thei it comenci to snewe and frese,
This king mot make his bed in mese.
He that had y-had knightes of priis
Bifor him kneland, and levedis,
Now seth he nothing that him liketh,
Bot wilde wormes bi him striketh.[31]

The text goes on in this fashion, making it extremely clear that Orfeo has given up all these things, exchanging them for their harsher, more spartan woodland counterparts. Once this is accomplished and Orfeo has spent his decade in the wild, he must enter Faerie through a hole in the rock, crawling three miles in the darkness. Only then has he truly rid himself of the air of civilisation which is so anathema to the deep wild that is Faerie.

A similar though not identical wildness can be found in *Tam Lin*, a ballad from the Scottish borderlands which presents many similar elements to those present in *Sir Orfeo*, including striking parallels between the humans and fairies. *Tam Lin* is the story of Janet, daughter of a Scottish nobleman, who rescues the titular character, a human knight, from captivity in the fairy court under the rule of the Fairy Queen. The specific origins of the tale are unknown, as it comes from an oral tradition as opposed to *Orfeo*'s origins in the Auchinleck Manuscript, a written collection of medieval narratives which can be more definitively dated. The text is written in Scots, and the story takes place around Carterhaugh, an actual location in the Scottish Borderlands. Unlike in *Sir Orfeo*, where the fairies are witnessed on a number of

[31] "Sir Orfeo", vv. 241-252 (He that once wore fine furs and slept on purple linens, now on hard heath he lies and covers himself with leaves and grass. He that had castles and towers… now that it begins to snow and freeze, he must make his bed in moss. He that had ladies and knights of prowess kneel before him, now he sees nothing that pleases him, but wild snakes by him glide.)

occasions, in *Tam Lin* they only appear in person at the climax of the story, and so our view of them is comparatively brief. There are, however, ample comparisons to be made, most specifically between Janet and the Fairy Queen.

The story begins with Janet dressing in green, a fairy color[32], and multiple descriptions of her afterward mention this green clothing. She goes walking in Carterhaugh, well known to be Tam Lin's domain and not a place for young women to travel in, lest he catch them. Janet does indeed meet the fairy knight, and returns home with child to her father's castle. Stubborn and determined, she leaves again for Carterhaugh and is confronted by Tam Lin who reveals that he is not a true fairy but rather a human knight held captive in their court. He fears that the fairies will soon sacrifice him to pay the 'tithe to hell', and gives Janet instructions on how to rescue him. She lies in wait for the fairy procession on Halloween (All Hallow's Eve, the day when the barriers between the fairy world, the mortal world, and the land of the dead are thinnest[33]), then pulls him from his horse and holds him tightly while the Fairy Queen puts him through a series of transformations to throw Janet off. Janet, however, holds on, and gets Tam Lin for her own, severing his ties to the fairy court. Again we see, as in *Sir Orfeo,* striking parallels between the fairy villain and the mortal protagonist.

It is interesting to note that where in *Sir Orfeo* the antagonist was a Fairy King in opposition to a mortal one, in *Tam Lin* a Fairy Queen has taken his place, reflecting a change from a male to a female protagonist. This is in keeping with the idea of the fairy's superficial

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[32] K. M. Briggs, "The English Fairies". *Folklore* , Vol. 68, No. 1 (Mar., 1957), p. 276. *JSTOR.* Web. "It is generally considered dangerous or unlucky to wear green, the fairies' colour,". Between the color of the Green Knight in *Sir Gawain & the Green Knight* and the color of Janet's clothing we can safely infer that this was likely the case in the Middle Ages as well.

[33] Briggs, "Fairies and the Realms of the Dead", p. 92

attributes as a mirror of those of the mortal hero. Both Janet and the Fairy Queen are noblewomen, both proud and unrelenting in their natures. Janet is unwilling to listen to anyone else's advice. The opening of the ballad warns the reader, saying:

> O I forbid you, maidens a,
> That wear gowd on your hair,
> To come or gae by Carterhaugh,
> For young Tam Lin is there.[34]

But immediately after this opening, Janet is shown heading directly to Carterhaugh in defiance of conventional wisdom. Upon her return from her meeting with Tam Lin, she ignores the concerns of the old knight and of her father, who in contrast is described as "meek and mild"[35]. The Fairy Queen appears more briefly, but her portrayal is stubborn and proud, first unwilling to relinquish her knight and then full of bitterness and malice once she has been forced to.

> Out then spak the Queen o Fairies,
> And an angry woman was she:
> 'Shame betide her ill-far'd face,
> And an ill death may she die,
> For she's taen awa the boniest knight
> In a' my companie.'[36].

Tam Lin himself is a relatively passive figure, serving primarily as the object of a battle of wills between Janet and the Fairy Queen. He appears when Janet picks a rose in Carterhaugh, almost as if summoned, and when she returns home she is pregnant (the action taken by Tam Lin which results in this pregnancy is conveniently left out). He gives Janet instructions on how to free him, but is unable to free himself. The text shows him taking almost no action at any point, in

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[34] Child, Francis J., ed. "The Child Ballads: 39. Tam Lin." Internet Sacred Text Archive. N.p., n.d. Web. 28 Apr. 2013. Variant A, v. 1

[35] "The Child Ballads: 39. Tam Lin." Variant A, vv. 1, 11-14

[36] "The Child Ballads: 39. Tam Lin." Variant A, v. 41

support of either mortal or fairy. He is, in a sense, suspended between the two. This reflects both his state of dual allegiance to his mortal heritage and the fairy court, but also the narrative as a product of Janet's attitude. Throughout the ballad Janet is fiercely independent, completely disregarding the advice of her male elders. It makes sense, then, that her quest is concerned primarily with a female adversary, and the only male main character (and one under fairy reign for the majority of the ballad) is largely passive.

Already we see similarities between the Fairy Queen and Janet. Interestingly enough, once Tam Lin has been liberated by Janet the Fairy Queen becomes wrathful and is described as an "angry woman"[37]. This is a telling description considering that she is, in fact, *not* a woman, if we use the OED primary definition of 'woman' as "an adult female human being". But for all intents and purposes she acts as one in the story: her primary purpose as an antagonist is to oppose Janet's right to a man, and once she loses she concedes that "Them who has gotten young Tam Lin/Has gotten a stately groom."[38]; she is upset by the loss of Tam Lin, the "bonniest knight" in her company, which would suggest that she had, after all, no intention to sacrifice him, as she would have lost him in that case as well.

Again, as in *Sir Orfeo*, the 'dark mirror' dynamic is seen between Janet and the Fairy Queen. One specific similarity, in fact, occurs in both texts. When Janet claims Tam Lin the Fairy Queen is furious with her, saying that "she's taen away the boniest knight/In a' my companie."[39] Bony, or bonny, is a Scots word meaning specifically beautiful or physically attractive. The use of this word suggests that the Fairy Queen prizes Tam Lin as a member of her

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[37] "The Child Ballads: 39. Tam Lin." Variant A, v. 41

[38] "The Child Ballads: 39. Tam Lin." Variant A, v.40

[39] "The Child Ballads: 39. Tam Lin." Variant A, v. 41

company specifically because he is so bonny, an attribute emphasized by Tam Lin himself earlier in the text when he calls himself "fair and fu o flesh"[40]. In both *Sir Orfeo* and *Tam Lin* the mortal protagonist has an emotional or familial bond with the taken; Orfeo is married to Heurodys, and Janet is pregnant with Tam Lin's child. In contrast, both the Fairy King and Queen in their respective works are shown to prize the people they have taken because of their physical beauty, valuing them as works of art of a sort.

In addition to the direct conflict between Janet and the Fairy Queen over Tam Lin there is also the issue of Carterhaugh itself. The ballad opens by warning young maidens not to go to Carterhaugh for fear of Tam Lin, then immediately segues into Janet going to Carterhaugh "as fast as she can hie". Once there, she and Tam Lin have an argument. Tam Lin enquires why Janet has come to Carterhaugh and picked his roses without his permission, to which she replies that her father has given her Carterhaugh and she will ask no leave of him (Tam Lin) to go there.[41] When Tam Lin tells Janet later of the teind to hell, he says "pleasant is the fairy land,/ but, an eerie tale to tell,/Ay at the end of seven years/*We* pay a teind to hell;"[42]. He includes himself as a denizen of the fairy land and a member of the court under the Fairy Queen. Therefore we can think of him as a vassal of sorts, and his claim over Carterhaugh, by extension, becomes a claim by the Queen, one which Janet challenges when she claims the land as her own. The entire conflict between Janet and the Fairy Queen is one of ownership, in which both Tam Lin and Carterhaugh are caught between competing mortal and fairy claims. Janet has been

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[40] "The Child Ballads: 39. Tam Lin." Variant A, v. 24

[41] "The Child Ballads: 39. Tam Lin." Variant A, v. 7 "'Carterhaugh, it is my ain,/My daddie gave it me;/I'll come and gang by Carterhaugh,/And ask nae leave at thee.'"

[42] "The Child Ballads: 39. Tam Lin." Variant A, v. 24. Italics are my own.

given Carterhaugh by her father, the local laird (a Scots term meaning landed noble), but the fairies have claimed it as well. This is especially interesting if we consider where the fairies live; both in *Tam Lin* and in *Sir Orfeo* Faerie is accessed by going underground. In *Sir Orfeo*, Orfeo travels through a hole in the rock, and in *Tam Lin* the fairy land is described as being located under a green hill. The fairies occupy the space underground, out of sight and out of mind in a sense. With Tam Lin's claim to Carterhaugh the fairy influence begins to creep into the domain of the civilised world. Carterhaugh and Tam Lin himself are both the sites of a conflict between civilisation, embodied by the mortal noblewoman Janet, and the wild unknown personified by the Fairy Queen. These conflicts however, of right to a lover and rights to land, are distinctly mortal ones which would ordinarily be resolvable by mortal means.

But the fairies are unmistakably magical, and as in *Orfeo*, the more inhuman and otherworldly tones to the story are evident. Indeed, Tam Lin himself says as much of the place that has been his home the past seven years, describing the fairy land as pleasant but eerie[43]. The fairies and their country are beautiful, but lurking beneath the surface is the teind to hell, a sacrifice which Tam Lin fears will be himself. His specific words are, "I am sae fair and fu o flesh/I'm feard it be mysel."[44] The choice of words is visceral, evoking images not of a quiet disappearance into hell but a human sacrifice for which one "fu o flesh" would be uniquely equipped. Specifically worth noting is the use of the word flesh, rather than something which would have similar significance such as 'life'. A teind to hell could easily be assumed to be something in the nature of a soul, but the use of 'flesh' implies that it is the meat on Tam Lin's physical body which matters.

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[43] "The Child Ballads: 39. Tam Lin." Variant A, v. 24

[44] "The Child Ballads: 39. Tam Lin." Variant A, v. 25

The Fairy Queen herself, though she may seem human for the aforementioned reasons, is decidedly something Other. A piercingly disconcerting example comes at the very end of the ballad, once Tam Lin has been won away from her. "But had I kend, Tam Lin,' she says,/'What now this night I see,/I wad hae taen out thy twa grey een,/And put in twa een o tree.'" The Queen, angry at her loss, says that if she had known she were going to lose Tam Lin she would have plucked out his grey eyes and replaced them with wood, a mysterious remark which has no clear meaning. Freud himself writes a whole section of *Das Unheimliche* on the uncanniness of the removal of eyes.[45]

There is, of course, also the matter of Tam Lin's transformations by the Fairy Queen, an act of powerful magic which sets her clearly apart from any mortal noblewoman. Tam Lin is transformed into a variety of things depending on which variant of the ballad is being used, but these things are always powerful and dangerous, things which humans would ordinarily avoid such as wild bears and poisonous snakes. More telling though, perhaps, is Tam Lin's instruction to Janet in variant B, that after he has reverted to his human form at last, she must dunk him first in a stand of milk[46] and then a stand of water. The water is more or less constant across the variants, but the milk has a potent connotation of domesticity and safety. Milk is what mothers feed to infants, and milk that is not from humans comes from tamed, domesticated animals (another protection against fairies in this vein is bread, something else possessing associations with home and hearth)[47], the implication being that fairy magic is to be combatted with things

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[45] Freud, Sigmund. (1919h). Das Unheimliche. *Imago*, 5: 297-324; *GW*, 12: 229-268; The "uncanny," *SE*, 17: 217-256. See Chapter 3 and the discussion of the removal of eyes in *Coraline*.

[46] The Child Ballads: 39. Tam Lin." Variant B, v. 34

[47] Briggs, 276

which are familiar and homely. If we consider fairies to be *unheimlich* then they are, by the literal meaning, "not of the home"; therefore it makes sense that things that are of the home could be used to counter their influence.

This leads back to the idea of fairies as the embodiment of nature and the uncontrollable wild in opposition to civilisation, a theme which recurs in *Tam Lin*. If we look at the incident of the transformations above, all of the forms which Tam Lin takes, (fire, wild animals) have one thing in common: they are not easily controlled or tamed. Faerie itself is said to be located under a green hill, just as in *Orfeo* it is accessed via a hole in a large rock, perhaps a cave. It is also important to note the time and meeting place at which Janet intercepts the Fairy Ride to rescue Tam Lin. She is instructed to go to Miles Cross at midnight on Halloween. These all have in common that they are in between one thing and another. A crossroads is the meeting of two roads, midnight the meeting of two days, and Halloween traditionally was the end of one season and the beginning of another, and a time when the line between the Otherworld and the mortal one was especially thin[48]. In this way Janet is better enabled to cross from her world to that of the fairies, and then to take something back with her.

It is also important to note the subtle difference in the narrative between *Tam Lin* and *Sir Orfeo*. If we continue on the premise that fairies serve to draw their human protagonists away from the civilised world and into the wild, we must look at the manner in which the encounter is initiated. In *Orfeo*, the Fairy King seeks out Heurodys, Orfeo's beloved wife, and kidnaps her. This forces Orfeo into a confrontation in which he must defend his world from the fairy element. And while the encounter between Janet and Tam Lin is initiated by the latter, it is only done so

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[48] Briggs, "The Fairies and the Realms of the Dead". p. 92

because Janet goes first to Carterhaugh. Janet clearly has little respect for her father and his knights, telling her father "There's neer a laird about your ha/Shall get the bairn's name." In the persons of Tam Lin and the Fairy Queen she is given both a worthy lover and a formidable adversary. If we think of the fairy element in *Tam Lin* as being, at least superficially, given form and character through Janet herself, it casts the story in something of a new light. Unlike either Orfeo or Sir Gawain (as we shall discuss soon), Janet, discontent with her lot, seeks out the element of otherness which is alien to her life at home. Ultimately, however, it becomes a story of defense against that other, just as *Sir Orfeo* does. Tam Lin is revealed to be a Christian man by birth, making their baby a mortal one. Janet fights off the unknown in the form of the Fairy Queen and reclaims Tam Lin for the civilised world.

Fairies and fairy influence in the Middle English masterpiece, *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight,* are somewhat less overt than in *Tam Lin* and *Orfeo*. Where *Orfeo* had a Fairy King and court, and *Tam Lin* has a Fairy Queen, the closest *Gawain* ever comes to actually saying the word 'fairy' is Morgan le Fay, where Fay comes from the French *fee*, meaning fairy (though the Green Knight himself is referred to as perhaps being "half etayn"[49] meaning giant, troll, or ogre, supernatural creatures which had associations with fairies[50]); and indeed, Morgan's appearance is brief and seems an almost slapdash addition at the very end in an effort to explain the Green Knight's motives[51]. Nevertheless, for students of fairy lore, and indeed those possessed of only the more basic trivia, the fairy influence is clear for reasons which shall be explained shortly.

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[49] Armitage, Simon. *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight: A New Verse Translation*. 1st ed. New York: W.W. Norton, 2007. Print. v. 140

[50] Briggs, "The English Fairies". pp. 272-3

[51] "Morgan le Fay in Sir Gawain and the Green Knight", Albert B. Friedman, *Speculum* , Vol. 35, No. 2 (Apr., 1960), pp. 260-274

What is more, it contains many of the same elements of uncanny doubling, of opposition between that which is fairy and that which is civilized, and of fairies drawing human heroes away from their homes, as the previous two texts.

The story begins in Arthur's court at Christmas time. The Green Knight rides his horse into the hall and challenges anyone who would take him up on it to a Christmas game, of sorts: the challenged is given one stroke at the Green Knight, and then in a year and a day must seek him out to receive a stroke in return. Gawain accepts, steps forward, and lops off the head of the Green Knight, who promptly picks it up off the ground by the hair, mounts his horse and rides off. Already the fairy influence is clear, if unstated: the Knight himself is not only clad in solid green, but possessed of long, green hair, a green beard, and even green skin[52]. The color will recur again before the poem ends, much as Janet's green clothing in *Tam Lin* signifies her inevitable involvement with the fairies. The story then skips forward to the next autumn, when Gawain sets off to find the Green Knight at his home, the Green Chapel, wherever it may be. He searches long for it with no luck, until at last he comes upon a beautiful castle where he might spend the holidays, for Christmas time is approaching again. The lord of the castle is most hospitable, and to Gawain's relief says that the Green Chapel is but two miles away, and that he will give Gawain a guide to lead him there on New Year's Day so that he may fulfill his agreement with the Green Knight. In the meantime, Gawain stays in the castle and he and the lord of the house, Sir Bertilak, have a game of sorts: each day, the lord will go out hunting and Gawain will stay in the house; at the end of the day the host will give Gawain whatever he has won on his hunt, and Gawain must give in return whatever he wins at home. As soon as the lord

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[52] Briggs, p. 276

of the house leaves, his beautiful wife approaches Gawain in his bed-chamber and attempts to seduce him, but to no avail. Ultimately he accepts from her only a green girdle said to protect its wearer from harm, but in doing so breaks his agreement with his host, refusing to surrender his gains in hope that the girdle will save his life. After three days, Gawain leaves to meet the Green Knight and face his doom. However, rather than executing him, the Knight only gives him a small cut on the neck, revealing that the Green Knight is, in fact, Sir Bertilak. Had Gawain accepted the advances of his host's wife and dishonoured himself, he would have been killed; however, because he only took the girdle, and that out of fear for his own life, he has been spared.

Here we have something of a reversal of the pattern in the previous examples of *Orfeo* and *Tam Lin*. In those stories the fairies appear at first as fairly human. They look more or less like humans, as the fairies in *Orfeo* do, and they have similar pastimes and social structures. They are measured by human standards and they have strong parallels with their respective human protagonists. Even though they may mark themselves as fairies in word early on, only later is it demonstrated to be true by something like a castle with crystal walls, or a transformation magic at a crossroads at midnight. *Gawain,* on the other hand, begins with the entrance of the Green Knight, someone who could never be mistaken for human, being both inhumanly large of frame and bright emerald green from head to toe, entering the scene and committing a distinctly inhuman act, being decapitated and riding away unharmed. However, once the quest begins in earnest and Gawain arrives at Sir Bertilak's house, we see nothing that is clearly inhuman in nature until the very end when we realize that Bertilak and the Green Knight

are one and the same, and that the fairy has been lurking right in front of our eyes in human form the whole time and we did not recognize him.

We see many of the same themes present in the Green Knight's appearances as in the fairy presence in *Orfeo* and *Tam Lin*. When Gawain finally confronts his adversary at the Green Chapel, he finds it to be not a church in the contemporary, Christian sense, but a green hill with a small entrance and a chamber inside, much like a how or barrow, the traditional abode of fairies.[53] A parallel may also be drawn to Tam Lin's assertion that the fairies live under "yon green hill", or to the fairy land of *Orfeo* which is accessed via a hole in a rock[54]. Much like the fairies in the previous texts, the Green Knight has a clear link to the natural landscape; his holy place is not a man-made church but a green mound. In some ways it even resembles a church; the text describes it as having "a hole on the ende and on ayther side,"[55] evoking the front door and transept of a cruciform church.

In addition, the story begins with the Green Knight, as our fairy element, issuing a challenge to the mortal court, much like the Fairy King at the outset of *Sir Orfeo*. Rather than simply stealing the queen away as she sleeps, the Fairy King comes to her in a dream and tells her that at that time tomorrow he will take her, and that there is nothing she or her husband can do to stop it. It is not merely an instance of fairy kidnapping, a common enough thing in folktales; it is a challenge made by the wild to the civilised world of chivalry. Just so, in *Gawain* the Green Knight's first appearance is with just such a challenge, made more clearly and overtly

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[53] Evans-Wentz, W.Y. *The Fairy Faith in Celtic Countries*. New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 1911. Print.

[54] "The Child Ballads: 39. Tam Lin." Variant A, v. 23

[55] Armitage, v. 2180

than in either text which precedes it. The Green Knight, upon entering Camelot, addresses King Arthur, saying:

> Bot for the los of the, lede, is lyft up so hyghe,
> And thy burgh and thy burnes best ar holden,
> Stifest under stel-gere on stedes to ryde,
> The wyghtest and the worthyest of the worldes kynde,
> Preve to play wyth in other pure laykes,
> And here is kydde cortaysye, as I haf herd carp,
> And that has wayned me hider, iwyis, at this tyme.[56]

The knight, as the agent of the fairy wilds, states that he is drawn to Camelot specifically because it is a bastion of order and civilisation. Arthur's knights are the best both at combat and at riding, his court is championed as a paragon of chivalry and of *courtesy*, a concept more integrally related to society than anything else listed. It is because Arthur's court is such an exemplar of these virtues that the Green Knight is drawn there to lay down his challenge.

Another essential attribute, also seen in *Orfeo*, is that of the journey away from the man-made world (in this case the court of Camelot) and into Faerie: a journey through the unknown. Indeed, Gawain's journey is not merely through the unknown but *to* the unknown. He leaves Camelot with no map, having never heard of the Green Chapel and with no idea where it might conceivably be. He spends months of hardship wandering through forests, almost completely alone, forced to forage for food and sleep out in the cold. This reinforces the idea that the medieval hero is surrounded on all sides by the unknown wild, a wilderness into which Gawain has been drawn by the fairy element. Only after months of wandering through the natural

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[56] Armitage, vv. 258-264, ("But because your acclaim is so loudly chorused, and your castle and brotherhood are called the best, the strongest men to ever mount the saddle, the worthiest knights ever known to the world, both in competition and true combat, and since courtesy, so it's said, is championed here, I'm intrigued, and attracted to your door at this time.")

landscape is he permitted to enter what passes for Faerie: Bertilak's house and, ultimately, the Green Chapel.

In addition to these themes, *Gawain* shows repeated instances of mirroring in a similar manner to that displayed in the previous texts. The most obvious of these is that inherent to the beheading game, (which begins with Gawain taking an axe to the Green Knight's neck and ends with that knight doing the same to him) but more subtle instances pervade throughout the text. The story begins with the Green Knight arriving at Arthur's court, acting as a sort of emissary (though it is not revealed at the time) of Morgan le Fay, and, in a more conceptual sense, as an emissary of the wilderness against which the chivalry of Arthur's round table is a bastion. In response Gawain is sent forth as an emissary of Arthur and of order and comes, unwittingly, to the very castle of the Green Knight and his mistress, and from there deliberately to the Green Chapel. In addition the story begins with the Green Knight coming to Camelot on a holy day and starts its conclusion with Gawain arriving at the Green Knight's (Bertilak) castle on the same holy day the next year.

The mirroring becomes even clearer once it is revealed that Bertilak and the Green Knight are one and the same; with this knowledge comparisons between Gawain and Bertilak become as significant as those between Gawain and the Green Knight. Gawain's entire stay at Bertilak's castle can be seen in a sense as a contest between the two. Gawain is renowned for his steadfast attention to duty, his purity, his honor and his propriety, a reputation which precedes him. When first he reveals himself as Gawain to Sir Bertilak's household the other dinner guests flock to him and and whisper to each other excitedly, saying:

> Now schal we semlych se sleghtes of thewes
> And the teccheles termes of talkyng noble.

Wich spede is in speche, unspurd may we lerne,
Syn we haf fonged that fyne fader of nurture….
In menyng of maneres mere
This burne now schal uus bryng.
I hope that may hym here
Schal lerne of luf-talkyng.[57]

Gawain's reputation is immediately established within Bertilak's household. With this in mind all interactions between Gawain and Bertilak can be viewed potentially as a contest in nobility of character. Much as Orfeo wins his wife from the Fairy Queen by a display of musicianship, the fairy antagonist here challenges Gawain on fields in which he is both knowledgeable and adept. Thanks to the duality of the fairy antagonist both aspects of Gawain's character can be confronted with worthy adversaries. The Green Knight, a hulk of a man armed to the teeth and engaged with Gawain in a potentially lethal trial, challenges his martial prowess. Sir Bertilak, on the other hand, is set in opposition to Gawain's famed courtesy and courtliness. These are opponents that Gawain, as a knight, can understand. However, when in the end Gawain goes to meet the Green Knight again the illusion of similarity is shattered by the nature of the Green Chapel, which Gawain describes as being the sort of place where the Devil might make his Mass.[58]

This contest of courtliness between Gawain and Bertilak is best illustrated by the agreement into which the two men enter, and indeed by the way the carrying out of said agreement is structured within the text. Each day for three days Bertilak rides out to go hunting in the morning, and Gawain is paid a visit by his host's wife, and each time the text is structured

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[57] Armitage, vv. 916-919, 924-927. ("Watch now, we'll witness his graceful ways, hear the faultless phrasing of flawless speech; if we listen we will learn the merits of language since we have in our hall a man of high honor. … We few shall learn a lesson here in tact and manners true, and hopefully we'll hear love's tender language too.")

[58] Armitage, vv. 1985-8

the same. It begins with Bertilak's hunt, described in great detail and in pursuit of a different quarry each time, and then follows up with Gawain's attempts to deflect the lady's advances while still remaining courteous. At the end of the day each exchanges what he gained, and it is revealed in the end of the story that Bertilak was well aware of all Gawain's interactions with his wife. The arrangement is a gentleman's agreement, relying on each to honorably provide the other with his gains for the day. This is the second time in the story, unbeknownst to Gawain, that the two men play a game of honor with each other.

One notable difference in *Gawain's* mirroring as compared to that of *Orfeo* and *Tam Lin* is the degree of difference in the characters of the protagonist and antagonist. While the fairies and mortals in the previous texts may share specific interests, pursue the same lovers or desire the same lands, the behaviour of the fairies is never much short of villainous, as well as being almost entirely inscrutable. In *Gawain*, Gawain and Sir Bertilak compete with each other but only in fun; indeed, their similarities outweigh their differences. At the end of the story no harm is done to anyone and Gawain and the Green Knight part ways as friends. The bitter antagonism that exists between Orfeo and the Fairy king and between Janet and the Fairy Queen, is simply not present in *Gawain*. When the Green Knight arrives at Camelot he specifically states that he means them no harm, saying,

> "Ye may be seker bi this braunch that I bere here
>
> That I passe as in pes, and no plyght seche."[59]

At no point in the story does the Green Knight display any malice towards Gawain, and ultimately it is revealed that he never desired to do Gawain harm, that the game they played was

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[59] Armitage, vv. 265-266. ("Be assured by this hollin stem here in my hand that I mean no menace. So expect no malice,")

merely a test of the knight's honor. This good-natured trickery is a far cry from the depictions of fairies in *Orfeo* and *Tam Lin*.

For all this seeming good nature, however, the Green Knight plays the same role as fairies in the first two texts. He draws the protagonist away from the civilised world and into a conflict of one kind or another in which the protagonist is forced to defend his world against the fairy's incursion. Each fairy figure serves, at its heart, this same purpose. They draw the mortal protagonists away from civilisation and the man-made world and into Faerie, the land of the wild and the untamed. The main character leaves his court and castle and goes off into the unknown wilderness to seek adventure and glory. More than this, however, he goes to fight things that are not within the confines of the court, things that are not under the control of man. Each of these texts begins with an incursion by this uncontrollable force, provoking, sometimes forcing, the mortal protagonist to leave his world and go out into the uncharted wild and defend against it. In each text the human protagonists struggle against the challenge of their fairy counterparts, fighting, in a metaphorical sense, to beat back the darkness. Orfeo and Janet seek to take something away from the fairies and make it their own again (though Tam Lin has been a fairy knight for some time at the start of the ballad, he was once a Christian man), and Gawain pits the chivalry and civilization of Arthur's court against the wildness of the Green Knight, exemplified by his Green Chapel. The fairies, however, come out of these encounters relatively unscathed. The hero is not seeking to conquer the wilderness, to expand the civilised world into the uncivilised; rather, he seeks only to defend what was his to begin with. It is for this reason that we see such strong similarities between the fairy elements and the mortal ones, especially in physical form. These fairies can be, at least at first, plausibly mistaken for human beings,

especially for other noblemen, women, or knights; they are enemies that can be beaten in the same way that one would defend against a mortal enemy. Each work is, at its heart, a story of humanity fighting against things that it does not understand, to protect what it holds dear. It is always easier to fight what you know, and so they give the fairies the face and form, the hobbies and pastimes, that they know best: their own.

## Chapter 2

The previous chapter examined human-sized fairies, specifically those found in the medieval texts *Tam Lin*, *Sir Orfeo*, and *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*. These fairies were beautiful, powerful, and dangerous; though they seemed at first glance much like their mortal counterparts, deeper investigation showed them to be subtly alien and different. They embodied an unknown, unmapped wilderness which could not be understood but only staved off. They also bore little resemblance to the popular conception of fairies just a few short centuries later: tiny creatures, mischievous at worst and benevolent at best. So what changed? Where did these new fairies, seemingly almost wholly unlike the old, come from? No doubt many factors contributed, a changing world and a newly discovered continent not least among them. Roger Lancelyn Green in his essay "Shakespeare and the Fairies" attributes much of the change to the the Bard, and specifically to his comedic fairy masterpiece, *A Midsummer Night's Dream*[60]. But this sudden shift was not merely a function of idle Shakespearean fancy. If we continue to think of fairy characters as catalysts of motion away from civilisation and society, we must consider the deeper reason behind their diminution. In order to understand this it may help us to look briefly at the actions taken by the fairies in the medieval texts that precipitate the movements made by their mortal counterparts. The basic, overarching structure of the medieval narratives is one in which the hero is drawn out to do battle (in one sense or another) with the fairy element in order to defend some element of his world; he takes back what is his, foiling if not defeating the fairy, and returns home. *Sir Orfeo* begins with the fairy king kidnapping the title character's beloved wife; in *Tam Lin*, Janet is impregnated by the titular character; and *Sir Gawain and the*

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[60] Green, Roger Lancelyn. "Shakespeare and the Fairies." *Folklore*. 73.2 (1962): 89-103. Print

*Green Knight* opens with a dramatic challenge to the honor of Arthur's court, culminating in a supernatural beheading. As mentioned in chapter one, the medieval texts invoke a sense of being surrounded by the wilderness, as we can see in Gawain's and Orfeo's extensive wanderings before they finally encounter Faerie. The medieval protagonist is beset on all sides by an antagonistic natural world which seeks to do harm to the place of order he has carved for himself out of the chaos. The fairy is given shape like to that of the hero because that form is the one which he best understands and is thus better equipped to defend against.

What changed then, to precipitate the change in fairies? In his essay 'On Fairy Stories', Tolkien writes of little fairies that they "seem to become fashionable soon after the great voyages had begun to make the world seem too narrow to hold both men and elves; when the magic land of Hy Breasail in the West had become the mere Brazils,"[61]. This gets to the heart of the matter. In the time between the writing of *Gawain* and the writing of *Midsummer*, the Americas were discovered. The age of exploration was in full swing and the unknown wilds were becoming less an ever-present threat to be defended against and more a fascinating potential for exploration; the age of castles, of fortified dwellings in which entire towns could and would hole up and hide from danger, was passing. As a result of all these changes, by the time Shakespeare was writing the lure fairies presented was of a somewhat different nature. As the natural world became something to be understood rather than defended against, fairies took on a different aspect. They became smaller, less threatening, less powerful, because the concept they embodied, that of the unknown wild, was no longer unconquerable. The questing knight defending his court had been supplanted by the explorer looking for something that could be understood, a world the limits of

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[61] Tolkien, p. 111

which could be found, defined, and classified. As such, fairies were in many ways diminished, first in the time of Shakespeare, and then continuing in the same tradition for more than three hundred years. Beginning around the time *Midsummer* was written the changes began, and though fairies would continue to change over the next three centuries much of what they were during that time would continue in this new tradition, finally reaching perhaps the best-known fairy of our time, Tinkerbell of J.M. Barrie's play (and later book) *Peter Pan*. But it is important in this study to begin at the beginning, as far as any single beginning can be found (a daunting if not impossible task when it comes to fairies), and to that end we must first examine *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, looking closely to see what differences arise between the large and small fairies, and what, if anything, remains the same.

Shakespeare is believed to have written *A Midsummer Night's Dream* between 1590 and 1596. It primarily follows the story of three sets of characters, set against the backdrop of the wedding day of Duke Theseus and his bride Hippolyta: the lovers, (Demetrius, Lysander, Hermia, and Helena) the fairies, (Oberon and Titania, the king and queen, as well as Puck, Oberon's servant) and the players (a group of Athenian laborers preparing a play for the upcoming nuptials).

Shakespeare's fairies are different from the large fairies of medieval literature in a number of key ways. First and most obviously, they are miniature (though they are played by human actors, the text makes their tiny size abundantly clear). The fairies in the medieval texts of the last chapter are human-sized at least, if not larger; the Green Knight, for instance, is so large he is considered to be perhaps half giant.[62] Though it can be assumed from Titania's brief

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[62] Armitage, v. 140

love affair with the human Bottom that the fairies are able to change size, their natural stature when among themselves seems to be quite small. When the fairies first appear, in the first scene of act two, Puck has a brief talk with a servitor of Titania who says of her queen, "The cowslips tall her pensioners be;/In their gold coats spots you see;/Those be rubies, fairy favours,/In their freckles live their savours:/I must go seek some dew-drops here,/And hang a pearl in every cowslip's ear."[63] This is the first of many implications that the fairies are of miniscule size. Cowslips are a yellow flower found most commonly in England (conspicuous, considering that Shakespeare sets his play in Greece); they grow to a maximum height of ten inches, and yet are described as tall by the fairy, giving us some idea of the speaker's size. In the next scene as Titania prepares to sleep she orders her servants, "Then, for the third part of a minute, hence;/ Some to kill cankers in the musk-rose buds,/Some war with rere-mice for their leathern wings,/ To make my small elves coats,"[64]. The fairies are small enough that bat-wings serve them as coats. These are but a few of the indications, present in nearly every scene in which the fairies play, demonstrating their small size. This provides an interesting contrast in more ways than one when compared to the large fairies of such texts as *Sir Orfeo*. There is, of course, the obvious change in size, but in their descriptions it seems that, where *Orfeo*'s fairies were almost more than human, Shakespeare's have become something less. When the Fairy King first appears in Heurodys' dream in *Orfeo*, he is ruler of a great and beautiful kingdom full of fertile lands and lord of an impressive host; his knights are described as the fairest Heurodys has ever seen [65]; he

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[63] Shakespeare, William. *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. 8th ed. New Haven: Yale UP, 1960. Print. The Yale Shakespeare. II.i. vv. 10-15

[64] Shakespeare, II.ii. vv. 2-5

[65] "Sir Orfeo", vv. 147-8. "Y no seighe never yete bifore, so fair creatours y-core." "Of all the folk that mine eyes have seen, they were the fairest folk, I ween."

wears a crown not of gold or silver but wrought of some mysterious gemstone that shines like the noonday sun; his castle wall, similarly, is made of solid crystal, with buttresses of red gold.[66] Compare this to the descriptors applied to Shakespeare's fairies. They have names like Peaseblossom, Cobweb, Moth, and Mustardseed, all names related to small plants and animals (when Bottom is introduced to these fairies he makes light of them by their names, saying of Cobweb "I shall desire of you more acquaintance, good Master Cobweb: if I cut my finger, I shall make bold with you"[67], meaning that he will use the cobweb as a bandage). In many ways they bear more similarities to insects, as Titania's lullaby to ward off the snake and hedgehog (potential threats to small beings) suggests.

Nevertheless, though they have become less than humans in stature and wealth, they demonstrate a somewhat more human characterization, specifically in the portrayal of their emotions. The tall, human-sized fairies of last chapter have certain superficial human traits and similarities with the mortal protagonists of their stories. They look like humans, albeit more beautiful, and enjoy spending their time in many of the same pursuits such as hunting, riding, and dancing. However, with the possible exception of the Green Knight, this is the extent of their development as characters. We are told nothing of their motives or their emotions, in contrast to what we see of the mortal protagonists. Orfeo, for instance, loves his queen and, wishing to be by her side always, goes to rescue her. The Fairy King's motives for kidnapping her in the first place, on the other hand, are never given; he only states that she must go with him, whether she wishes to or not[68]. The closest a human-sized fairy ever comes to expressing an

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[66] "Sir Orfeo", vv. 140-64, 350-63

[67] Shakespeare, III.ii. vv. 190-91

[68] "Sir Orfeo", vv. 165-174

emotion is in *Tam Lin*, when Janet steals Tam Lin and the Fairy Queen flies into a rage. No indication is given, however, that the Fairy Queen views Tam Lin as anything more than a possession that has been stolen from her. She demonstrates no emotional attachment to him. The Green Knight, admittedly, looks less human than these others, but only in his coloration; his shape is nearly identical to that of a formidable human knight. Even more human in appearance is his unenchanted state as a seemingly human lord of a manor, with a wife and servants, and while his wife is often described as beautiful, Bertilak never mentions any love he might fell for her. Gawain is unable to tell that Bertilak and the Green Knight are one and the same until the truth is revealed to him at the conclusion. This is because the essential nature of the wilderness that the medieval fairies embody is not for us to know.

Titania, Oberon, and Puck, on the other hand, as major characters in the play, exhibit substantially different behavior from that of the medieval fairies in the aforementioned texts. This difference is made clear almost from their introduction and is inherent in the fundamental dynamic of the characters' relationship within the play; to wit, they (Oberon and Titania) are engaged in a lover's spat. In their first interaction of the play, the fairy king and queen cannot even greet each other civilly. "*Obe.* Ill met by moonlight, proud Titania./*Tita.* What! jealous Oberon. Fairies, skip hence: I have forsworn his bed and company."[69] Titania refuses not only to sleep with Oberon but even to spend any time with him. Oberon and Titania bicker incessantly with each other. This, in itself, is one of the most obvious differences from the medieval texts: the fairy king and queen occupy the same space such that they *can* bicker. *Tam Lin* has a fairy queen, *Orfeo* a fairy king, but neither has both at once. This reflects the change in

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[69] Shakespeare, II.i. vv. 60-62

protagonists; where Janet was opposite the Fairy Queen, and Orfeo opposite the Fairy King, now we have two sets of feuding lovers as our protagonists, necessitating both a king and a queen of Faerie. This state of being engaged in a lover's spat is also a marked difference from the medieval fairies, largely because our insight into the minds of the fairies is far greater than it ever was before. We are never given the reason behind the exploits of Fairy King and Queen of *Orfeo* and *Tam Lin.*

Another distinctly human trait, which is to say an emotion (many things in folklore can take on the appearance of humans, but very few behave as they do) displayed by Oberon is that of pity. While waiting in the woods for Puck to return with the Love-in-Idleness flower, Oberon overhears Demetrius abusing Helena and takes pity on her. When Puck returns, Oberon issues a command. "A sweet Athenian lady is in love/With a disdainful youth: anoint his eyes;/But do it when the next thing he espies/May be the lady."[70] Oberon, an immortal fairy, is possessed by an almost paternal concern for Helena, a human girl. More importantly, we are clearly informed of the motive behind Oberon's intervention.

One can, however, argue a different motive for the fairy king's intervention in the love life of the Athenian youths. When Demetrius and Helena have finished their fight and left the stage, Oberon says to himself, "Fare thee well, nymph: ere he do leave this grove,/Thou shalt fly him, and he shall seek thy love."[71] This phrasing suggests a motive not so much of pity but of mischievous amusement. Oberon's stated desire is not merely to make Demetrius love Helena whom he scorns, but to reverse the tide and make his love so overwhelming that even the one who loves him now will be unable to accept it. This paints Oberon less as a concerned parent

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[70] Shakespeare, II.i. vv. 260-263

[71] Shakespeare, II.i. vv. 244-246

and more as a sort of prankster, a view reinforced by the instructions he gives to Puck. "Effect it (the enchantment) with some care, that he may prove/More fond on her than she upon her love."[72] If this change is effected as Oberon describes it the situation becomes neither better nor worse, but merely humorously reversed for the benefit of the observers, the fairies.

The second noticeable change in Shakespeare's fairy characters is in their power, and specifically in the way that power relates to the role they fill in the play. In the medieval texts of the previous chapter, the role played by the fairies was unquestionably that of the antagonist. Even in *Gawain and the Green Knight*, a text in which the primary antagonist is ultimately revealed to mean Gawain no harm, the Green Knight still presents an imposing and potentially lethal figure. The fairies of *Midsummer* have been diminished, placing them in entirely different roles, ranging from benignly paternal figures at best (as when they bless the houses of the newlyweds at the conclusion of the play), to pranksters and tricksters at worst. This is perhaps best exemplified by one of the play's most enduring characters, Puck, in his introduction. Titania's servant recognizes Puck, saying, "Are you not he/That frights the maidens of the villagery;/Skim milk, and sometimes labour in the quern,/And bootless make the breathless housewife churn;/And sometime make the drink to bear no barm;/Mislead night wanderers, laughing at their harm?"[73] Puck's activities seem to be primarily composed of harmless tricks, specifically those concerned with domestic, household activities (churning butter, milking cows, grinding meal, and brewing beer).

The nature of these pranks resonates with one of the few attributes Shakespeare's small fairies share in common with their man-sized, medieval counterparts: a close relationship and

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[72] Shakespeare, II.i. vv. 265-266

[73] Shakepseare, II.i. vv. 34-39

connection with the natural world (especially with plants and things which grow in the ground, acting as care-takers of sorts) and antagonism towards man-made things. The cowslips are named as the fairy queen's 'pensioners', a word in this context meaning dependents, depending on the fairies, at the very least, to bestow upon them their 'rubies' (red dots sometimes found inside cowslip flowers). Before Titania falls asleep she tasks some of her people to 'kill (the) cankers in the musk-rose buds'; musk-rose is a wild flower and cankers are a kind of plant rot. The primary duties the servant fairies display, aside from taking care of their king and queen, are to protect and beautify the forest. On a larger scale, Titania and Oberon's bickering seems to have upset the natural world. "But with thy brawls thou hast disturb'd our sport./Therefore the winds, piping to us in vain,/As in revenge, have suck'd up from the sea/Contagious fogs; which, falling in the land,/Hath every pelting river made so proud/That they have overborn their continents"[74]. In a further, implicit addition to this connection, the fairies are only active within the forest, almost for the complete duration of the play. The mortal characters are only affected once they leave the city of Athens and enter the wood, and once all has been resolved and set right they immediately leave the wood and return to Athens. Only at the very end do Titania and Oberon enter the house of the newlyweds to bless it, and then only once all the mortal characters have finished their parts in the play and will not return.

Nevertheless the fairy connection to nature, in particular to the unknown wild, and the corresponding antipathy towards civilisation, lack the potency of the medieval texts. Shakespeare has done away with the necessary journey through the unknown which the hero must undertake before he can enter Faerie. As discussed in chapter one, each medieval text

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[74] Shakespeare, II.i. vv. 87-92

involves a journey through the unknown (Orfeo through the rock, Janet at the midnight crossroads, Gawain through the wilderness) before they can encounter the fairies they seek. The protagonists of *Midsummer*, on the other hand, leave Athens and go straight to the fairy wood without incident, implying foreknowledge of its exact location. The arduous journey which must be undertaken before the medieval protagonist can access Faerie gives a sense of space between it and the known world and places it apart. By contrast, the ease with which the forest is accessed by the mortals, as well as Oberon and Titania's casual references to far-off but known lands such as India, reinforces the feeling that Shakespeare's fairies do not have a land of their own.

Returning to the fairy mischief mentioned before; if we view Puck and the other fairies as emissaries and guardians of the natural world, their pranks can be seen to make a certain sort of sense. Puck, as an agent of nature, purposely disrupts the activites of civilisation (in which, as shown above, the fairies have no part), especially those which involve subduing the natural world to make it useful; a quern, for instance, is a device used for grinding grain into meal, altering something of nature — a plant — into the foundation for something wholly domestic, i.e. bread. This is in keeping both with the old role of fairies, acting as emissaries of the natural world challenging the civilised one, but also with the diminished state of Shakespeare's fairies as pranksters. In *Gawain and the Green Knight*, the Green Knight acts in the role of emissary from the natural world as well; his chapel, after all, is a naturally formed cave. However, he also rides his horse into the middle of Arthur's court, so large he is described as being half giant[75], and equipped with an enormous axe, striking a very threatening figure. His role as potential

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[75] Armitage, v. 140

executioner hangs in the air all through the text. Puck, on the other hand, is content to skim the fat from milk.

This difference is made perhaps most abundantly clear through a comparison of their respective magics, specifically Puck's transformation of Bottom as compared to the fairy queen's transformations of Tam Lin. Puck transforms Bottom's head into the head of an ass, both for his own amusement and so that Titania, waking, will fall in love with the transformed man. The choice of transformation here is important; Bottom is changed into a common beast, one which lends itself traditionally to being the butt of the joke. The fact that he is an ass only serves to heighten Titania's humiliation, further diminishing her stature. This stands in stark contrast to the transformation magic of *Tam Lin*'s Fairy Queen. In response to Janet seizing the fairy knight and pulling him from his horse, the fairy queen grows angry and changes him into a series of threatening and dangerous shapes, first a poisonous snake, then a bear, then a red hot iron and finally a burning coal. Each of these things, were they real and not mere illusions, could end Janet's life; Puck's pranks, though mischievous, pose no real threat.

Even further from these roots are Oberon and Titania, whose attitude towards mortals is almost that of concerned parents; indeed, in the case of Titania it could be said to be exactly that. The source of contention between the fairy king and queen is a boy, referred to as a changeling child, who Titania has taken and whom Oberon wishes to have as part of his train. However, the boy is not a changeling in the traditional sense of the word. Ordinarily, the word changeling is used when a fairy kidnaps a human child and replaces him with an inferior, magical copy; changeling often refers to the copy, but can be used to refer to the child[76]. This is not the case

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[76] Briggs, 274

with Titania and her 'changeling'. While arguing with Oberon she states that the boy is the son of a 'votaress' of hers, and paints a picture of a close friendship between herself and the boy's mother. She then goes on to explain how she came by the boy. "But she (the mother) being mortal, of that boy did die;/And for her sake I do rear up her boy,/And for her sake I will not part with him."[77] She feels a loyalty to the boy's deceased mother, and for the mother's sake is dedicated to raising the boy as her own. In both *Sir Orfeo* and *Tam Lin* a human (though not a child) is taken by the Fairy King or Queen. However no indication is given of a prior relationship between the fairies and either the mortal taken or said mortal's friends or relations. The fairy kidnapping is perceived rather as an assault on the protagonist and the civilised world; Titania, on the other hand, seems to have nothing but good will for her votaress and the woman's son.

One more tie that Shakespeare has severed in creating his court of small fairies is that longstanding one between fairies and the dead, a connection ably demonstrated in *Sir Orfeo* and, less obviously, in *Tam Lin*. *Orfeo*, for all its knights and fairies, is an altered re-telling of the classical Greek myth of Orpheus and Eurydice; the main difference (aside from the addition of a happy ending) is that where in *Orfeo* the queen is kidnapped and taken to Fairyland, in the original myth Eurydice dies and Orpheus pursues her to the Underworld, the land of the dead. In *Tam Lin*, the event which immediately precipitates the titular character's transport to Fairyland is a bad fall from a horse[78], an event which could easily be interpreted as resulting in Tam Lin's death. An implicit connection is made, then, between Fairyland and the realm of the dead, reinforced in countless folktales and described at length in folklorist K.M. Briggs' essay, "The

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[77] Shakespeare, II.i. vv. 135-137

[78] "The Child Ballads: 39. Tam Lin." Variant A, v.23

Fairies and the Realms of the Dead". In *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, Shakespeare directly addresses this possible relation and refutes it. When Oberon explains his plans to Puck, Puck responds, saying:

> "*Puck.* My fairy lord, this must be done with haste,
> For night's swift dragons cut the clouds full fast,
> And yonder shines Aurora's harbinger;
> At whose approach, ghosts, wandering here and there,
> Troop home to churchyards: damned spirits all.
> That in cross-ways and floods have burial,
> Already to their wormy beds are gone;
> For fear lest day should look their shames upon,
> They wilfully themselves exile from light,
> And must for aye consort with black-brow'd night.
> *Obe.* But we are spirits of another sort.
> I with the morning's love have oft made sport;"[79]

Shakespeare acknowledges that fairies might mistakenly be lumped in with this group of spirits, and so subject to the rules which apply to them, but clearly states that this is not the case.

Fairies are, by nature, different and separate from humans. However, the way in which this difference manifests itself changes between the medieval and post-medieval fairies. Rather than taking on the general form and semblance of human beings while maintaining a subtly uncanny difference in character, post-Shakespearean fairies have transferred that sense of difference onto their physical forms. They no longer appear human, having more in common with insects in some ways, but instead act just like us, engaging in pity, empathy, lover's quarrels, etc. This transfer of difference allows for a different sort of fairy characters; their motivations are clear,

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[79] Shakespeare, III.ii. vv. 378-389

their actions more easily explained, and their lives more intimately tied up with those of mankind.

This is because the relationship between fairies, the embodiment of the unknown wilderness that exists outside the civilised world, and the mortal protagonists who are of that world, has changed. As has been discussed before, in the medieval texts the role of the fairies is to personify the wild in such a way that its incursions can be defended against. The fairy element makes forays into the mortal world which are then retaliated against, but neither side gains ground. By the time of *A Midsummer Night's Dream* this is no longer the case. The fairies appear to have ceased their raids; instead, they come to bless the marital bed of the newly wed nobility. On top of this we can also view Lysander and Hermia's escape into the forest as an attempt to expand civilisation into the fairy domain. If we think of marriage as an element of civilisation, then the lovers' attempt to make their nuptials in the forest can be seen to represent an expansion of civilised mores into the wild, beginning the process of subduing it. Though their flight is away from Athenian law, their desire is not to live free of all law but rather to create their own.

The fairy archetype which Shakespeare does so much to establish here (small, twee things that wear bats' wings for coats and stand knee-high to a flower) comes to dominate the next several centuries, to the point that in 1765 Samuel Johnson wrote of "the fairy kind", that they are "an order of Beings to which tradition has always ascribed a sort of diminutive agency, powerful but ludicrous,"[80]. However, this is not to say that the older, more folkloric fairy traditions have been completely eliminated; rather they they continue to exist just below the

[80] Lancelyn Green, p. 97

surface, bubbling up in new works periodically, if infrequently. One such work is William Allingham's poem, *The Fairies,* published in 1850. The poem begins with the lines, "Up the airy mountain/Down the rushy glen,/We daren't go a-hunting,/For fear of little men;"[81] and goes on to describe a figure who might be the fairy king, as well as the kidnapping and death of a girl named Bridget. The fairies in Allingham's poem are undoubtedly of the small, somewhat twee variety, as can be seen in the first stanza of the poem:

> Wee folk, good folk,
> Trooping all together;
> Green jacket, red cap,
> And white owl's feather.
> Down along the rocky shore
> Some make their home,
> They live on crispy pancakes
> Of yellow tide-foam;
> Some in the reeds
> Of the black mountain-lake,
> With frogs for their watch-dogs,
> All night awake.

This description is very much in the tradition that spawned such works as Drayton's *Nymphidia* and Herrick's *Hesperides*, in which the fairies use toadstools for tables and dine on newt's legs.[82] However, it is important to note that the poem opens with a warning, the necessity of which becomes apparent later on when we are told the story of 'little Bridget'.

> They stole little Bridget
> For seven years long;
> When she came down again
> Her friends were all gone.
> They took her lightly back
> Between the night and morrow;
> They thought she was fast asleep,

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[81] Allingham, William (2012-05-17). Sixteen Poems. Kindle Edition. p. 11

[82] Lancelyn Green, pp. 96-97

But she was dead with sorrow.
They have kept her ever since
Deep within the lake.[83]

The charming little men who dine on pancake foam suddenly become much more dangerous. The fairies in Allingham's poem owe more to folklore than to the medieval traditions of the fairy court, it is true, but nevertheless they lack the wholly wholesome nature of many of the post-medieval fairies. For one thing, they appear to be directly responsible for the death of a small girl. Allingham's fairies cast a pall of fear on the landscape, such that people refuse to enter their domain for fear of them. Allingham has also revived the connection between fairies and the dead; the fairies in his poem do not just kill little Bridget, they keep her body deep within the lake. On the whole the beings of *The Fairies* seem to possess an essential nature more in keeping with the medieval fairies, only masked by a thin veneer of post-medieval, Shakespeare-esque attributes.

These changes do not, however, seem to be the norm, as evidenced by the wild popularity of our next text, J.M. Barrie's *Peter Pan,* and its decidedly more post-medieval fairy elements. *Peter and Wendy*, as the novel was originally called, was based on Barrie's stage play, *Peter Pan, or The Boy Who Wouldn't Grow Up*, and brought into the public imagination two of the most enduring fairy characters ever written, Tinker Bell and Peter Pan himself. Though Allingham's fairies are more of a throwback to older traditions than would be commonly seen for some time, nevertheless fairies were beginning to grow claws once more, and these can be seen to some extent in *Peter Pan*, without by any means abandoning the post-medieval elements. In the characters of Peter Pan and Tinker Bell both sides of the fairy tradition, the perilous and the

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[83] Allingham, p. 11

prankster, are represented. In order to fully understand this we must examine in detail both characters, beginning with the one Barrie himself identifies as a fairy, Tinker Bell.

If we look at the changes Shakespeare wrought in his fairies in the most basic way, we see that while they look less like humans (being substantially smaller and comparable in many ways to insects), they behave more like them. In Tinker Bell, often refered to as Tink[84], this process reaches its natural conclusion. Barrie describes her at first as a light flashing about the Darlings' night-time nursery, but then as "a fairy, no longer than your hand… It was a girl called Tinker Bell, exquisitely gowned in a skeleton leaf, cut low and square, through which her figure could be seen to the best advantage."[85] Tink, like Shakespeare's fairies, is small, no bigger than a child's hand. Note the description used to identify her size, however, compared to that in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. Shakespeare's fairies are implicitly compared in size to flowers, acorn cups, bat wings, etc. This accentuates an unspoken connection to the natural world; for Tinkerbell the standard of comparison is neither plant nor animal but a human child's hand. Indeed, the origin of Barrie's fairies is explicitly a human one: "'You see, Wendy, 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.'"[86] Tinkerbell and her ilk owe their very lives not to the land, to the forests and the lakes, but to humanity. They are brought into existence by the laugh of a human baby. What is more, those same human beings appear to have control over whether the fairies live or die. "'You see, children know such a lot now, they soon don't believe

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[84] Barrie, J. M. *Peter Pan in Kensington Gardens ; Peter and Wendy*. Oxford: Oxford UP, 2008. Print. p. 93 onwards

[85] Barrie, p. 89

[86] Barrie, p. 93

in fairies, and every time a child says, "I don't believe in fairies," there is a fairy somewhere that falls down dead.'"[87] So we see that human children have direct and complete control of both the birth and death of fairies. We must also take note of Tinker Bell's name, as Barrie does, for it too is not without significance; the author practically spells it out for us. Shortly after Tink's introduction, Peter explains to Wendy that "'she is called Tinker Bell because she mends the pots and kettles.'"[88] This is entirely contrary to almost everything we have seen of fairies before. Far from being anathema to civilisation, Tinker Bell actually aids in its continuance by repairing the elements by which raw things are converted into food. Where previous fairies were demonstrated to have an aversion to or hatred for domestic items and processes, like Puck does when he skims the fat off the milk, Tinker Bell is intimately connected to them.

One of the fundamental defining characteristics of fairies in all of the texts previously examined in this work has been their inherent connection to nature and to the land, whether mortal land or that of some Otherworld. *Tam Lin*'s fairies clash with Janet over the possession of Carterhaugh, as well as being described as living under the green hill; likewise, the Green Knight makes his church under a hill in a green valley by a stream; not to mention the strong antipathy which *Orfeo*'s Fairy King and his country bear towards the world of mankind. Even Shakespeare's fairies, reduced as they are from their former stature, have an undeniable link to the forest in which they dwell, caring for it and guarding it. Tinker Bell has abandoned this connection in all but the most superficial sense, her only concession her clothes, a dress constructed from a 'skeleton leaf'. Tinker Bell is a creature of air and imagination, light and

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[87] Barrie, p. 93

[88] Barrie, p. 94

sound with no substance. Her speech is described as "the loveliest tinkle as of golden bells"[89] and she is frequently seen rapidly flitting from place to place, appearing only as a ball of brilliant light (indeed, in the original stage production Tinker Bell was represented not by an actress but by a spotlight, and voiced by a set of bells[90]). Perhaps most telling is Tinker Bell's (and all the fairies') role in allowing the children to fly. Barrie explains to the audience as the Darling children attempt to fly that, "Peter had been trifling with them, for no one can fly unless the fairy dust has been blown on him. Fortunately, as we have mentioned, one of his hands was messy with it, and he blew some on each of them…"[91] Tinker Bell, and presumably all other fairies, involuntarily shed 'fairy dust' around them, and it is this fairy dust which enables the Darling children to fly, actively severing their connection with the earth both in the immediate, literal sense of solid ground, and also a broader sense in that their newfound ability to fly takes them away from home and across water to Neverland.

Of course an integral part of the fairy element in these texts is not just the fairies but the land, Faerie itself. In the case of *Peter Pan* this function is served by Neverland, the very nature of which says a great deal about the state of fairies in *Peter Pan*. For one thing, Neverland, like Tinkerbell, is formed in no uncertain terms wholly from the collective human imagination. As the Darling children approach in the air they catch sight of the physical incarnations of their make-believe games. "'I say, John, I see your flamingo with the broken leg.' 'Look, Michael, there's your cave.' … 'It's a wolf with her whelps. Wendy, I do believe that's your little

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[89] Barrie, p. 89

[90] Roger Lancelyn Green, *Fifty Years of Peter Pan*, Peter Davies Publishing, 1954. Apologies for the incompleteness of the citation, I was unable to find either a copy of the book in any medium or the ISBN number.

[91] Barrie, p. 100

whelp.'"[92] More important than this, however, is Neverland's state of *awayness* (to coin a term). After being slowly relegated to smaller and smaller parts of the land, from being potentially almost anywhere in England in *Gawain,* to one forest in *Midsummer*, Faerie has finally retreated from the world entirely and become a place apart with no apparent ties to the earthly world. The unknown has become progressively more and more knowable until, finally, it has been completely subdued by civilisation, forcing it out and away from the world of men, its cities and maps. Faerie has been forced to surrender its connection to the natural world, because the natural world is no longer an unknown. Even the journey to Faerie has lost its mystery, since the Darling children have Peter to guide them there.

Another measure of fairies has always been their relationship with, and similarities in form or character to, mortals. The medieval fairies in last chapter's texts challenge the mortal protagonists, fight with them, steal from them, and share many of their superficial characteristics, but the audience is given very little insight into their minds. This is because their purpose is not to be understood but to be combatted in a direct, confrontational fashion; the human characters' motivations, by contrast, are very clear. By Shakespeare's time the fairies have lost much of this inscrutability and are openly shown bickering with each other and displaying emotions such as affection and pity, reflecting the relationships of their human protagonists. The audience is given a great deal more insight into their minds than ever before; their otherness, rather than being an aspect of their demeanor, has been transferred to their physical form. Tinker Bell again takes this transferral a step further. When Wendy first meets Tink she is enchanted with her (in the figurative, non-magical sense); Peter conveys her feelings to Tink, saying that Wendy wishes

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[92] Barrie, p. 105

Tink were her fairy. Peter translates Tink's response for Wendy, saying "'She is not very polite. She says you are a great ugly girl, and that she is my fairy.'"[93] Tinker Bell demonstrates a clear love for and strong emotional attachment to Peter, and what is more there is an implication that the reader actually understands her better than Peter himself. When Wendy and Peter kiss, Tink immediately responds by pulling Wendy's hair and tells Peter that every time they kiss she will do the same. "'Why, Tink?' Again Tink replied, 'You silly ass.' Peter could not understand why, but Wendy understood;"[94]. The reader is expected to infer that Tink is in love with Peter, as Wendy does, but Peter does not understand. This is an entirely different viewpoint from that we are given of the medieval fairies, whose actions we see but whose mind we rarely glimpse. Tinker Bell's mind, on the other hand, is clearer to the reader than to Peter himself. In many ways Barrie's most famous fairy, Tinker Bell, can be seen as the logical extension of the changes wrought in Shakespeare's fairies. She presents primarily as a ball of light, only seeming at all human when she stays still long enough to be inspected closely; however, greater pains are taken to develop her character and make her motivations clear and understandable than with any previous fairy. This is because in the absence of a strong connection to something larger than herself, to the unknown or to nature, Tinker Bell has little to nothing other than her physical form to set her apart from the human characters. The element of alien otherness which defined so much of fairies before has been stripped away.

Peter Pan himself, however, is something rather different from Tinkerbell. While it cannot be said that he is, in the most technical sense, anything other than human (being born as a human baby), if we consider the fact that 'mortal', meaning fated to die, is also a frequent

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[93] Barrie, p. 94

[94] Barrie, p. 96

synonym for 'human', and that Peter Pan is not, in fact, mortal at all, we begin to see the complexity of the issue. He is, as old Solomon Caw calls him in *Peter Pan in Kensington Gardens*, a "Betwixt-and-Between"[95]. He certainly cannot be called 'mortal', as we see in the final chapter of *Peter and Wendy* that he stays the same age as generations of Wendy's descendants grow old and die, strongly implying that Peter is immortal (though not impossible to kill, as his embrace of his own imminent death at the Lagoon in chapter eight shows). Of all possible labels he is perhaps closer to being a changeling than to anything else; but unlike the old changelings, children stolen in their infancy and taken to fairyland, Peter Pan goes of his own volition. In character, however, Peter presents something of a cross between the whimsical, emotional, trickster fairies of the post-medieval era, and the more sinister man-sized fairies of the medieval texts.

To begin with, he acts, like fairies in the old tradition, as a thief of children. The way in which Barrie describes Peter when he first meets the Darling children in their nursery at night is very telling to this effect and paints a surprisingly sinister picture of the eternal youth. He speaks to Wendy "in a voice that no woman has ever yet been able to resist,"[96] and he is described as "cunning Peter," "frightfully cunning," and "the sly one"[97]. The children, meanwhile, are portrayed as utterly unable to resist his charms, lured by him away from their nursery.

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[95] Barrie, p. 17

[96] Barrie, p. 91

[97] Barrie, pp.95-97

Not only does he lure these children from their home, but he takes them across the sea (one of the traditional ways to access Faerie[98]) to a magical land with which he has a deep, intrinsic connection. The fifth chapter of *Peter and Wendy* opens with a statement to this effect: "Feeling that Peter was on his way back, the Neverland had again woken into life."[99] Peter's connection to the land is explicitly stated; it is aware of him and his presence has a direct effect on it. Indeed, his connection with Neverland is in many ways far deeper than that he possesses with any living being.

While it is true that Peter is certainly not devoid of feeling, his emotions and in particular his interpersonal connections are fleeting and of little personal significance to him. In the final chapter of *Peter and Wendy*, Peter returns to see Wendy as he had promised. She tries to reminisce with him about their adventures of the previous year, but with no success. "'Who is Captain Hook?' he asked with interest when she spoke of the arch enemy. 'Don't you rememeber,' she asked, amazed, 'how you killed him and saved all our lives?' 'I forget them after I kill them' he replied carelessly. When she expressed a doubtful hope that Tinker Bell would be glad to see her, he said, 'Who is Tinker Bell?'"[100]. Peter is, at his heart, first and foremost a being of Neverland, forming no lasting interpersonal connections and possessed, in some ways like *Sir Orfeo*'s Fairy King who kidnaps Heurodys to display her in his court, only of fleeting desires and whims. Both Neverland and Peter seem to have a sort of resistance to

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[98] O'Conor, Norreys Jephson. "The Early Irish Fairies and Fairyland." *Sewanee Review*. 28.4 (1920): 556. Print. Also see Thomas Rymer in which Thomas's journey to Fairie is all in darkness but constantly accompanied by the sound of the sea.

[99] Barrie, p. 112

[100] Barrie, p. 219

alterations in the status quo; each changes from time to time but ultimately returns to the way it was. They are both eternal, unchanging.

At the same time he possesses the same complex, almost love-hate relationship with domesticity that so many folkloric fairies seem to have (for instance, milk is said to be both a preferred food of the fairies and proof against them).[101] Peter becomes indignant when Wendy, seeing him crying in her nursery, suggests that his lack of a mother could be the source of his grief.[102] Similarly, he forbids his Lost Boys from discussing mothers at all in his presence. However, he develops a strong attachment (inasmuch as he is able) to Wendy, to the point of playing house with her and pretending the Lost Boys are their children; Wendy, who of all the characters in the book most represents domesticity and civilisation. This is perhaps best demonstrated by her gift to him at their first meeting when he, not knowing what a kiss is, expects a physical object. Wendy, momentarily at a loss, responds by giving him a thimble, an object used in sewing, an activity with powerful domestic ties.[103]

Knowing all this about Peter casts his theft of the Darling children in a new light, strongly reminiscent of the medieval fairies. He acts as an agent of the uncivilised natural world, infiltrating the civilised one with intent to take something away, to lay down a challenge, and, especially in the post-industrial revolution age, to suggest that perhaps mankind's mastery of wild nature is not as complete as it might seem. However, from this point forward the relationship between Peter, the fairy, and Wendy, the human, procedes entirely according to post-medieval logic. Far from being required to defend her world against the fairy influence, Wendy

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[101] Briggs, pp. 276, 281

[102] Barrie, p. 90.

[103] Barrie, p. 92

travels to Faerie (Neverland) and acts as a missionary of sorts, attempting to teach civilisation to Peter and the Lost Boys. "About this time Peter invented, with Wendy's help, a new game that fascinated him enormously… It consisted in pretending not to have adventures, in doing the sort of thing John and Michael had been doing all their lives: sitting on stools flinging balls in the air, pushing each other, going out for walks and coming back… He boasted that he had gone a walk for the good of his health."[104] Wendy's civilising influence creeps into Peter's fairy wildness, eventually leaving perhaps the only permanent mark anyone has ever left on him; for decades after the end of the novel, Barrie tells us, Wendy's descendants would periodically go away with Peter to Neverland for a week to do his spring cleaning.[105]

I wrote above that Peter is a sort of changeling, but unlike the traditional changeling figure he leaves to live with the fairies on his own, a significant and telling difference. Peter is a changeling for a new era. The old tradition of changelings comes from a place of fear, fear of the wild that lurks outside the home; the same sort of attitude that underlay the tall, powerful, dangerous fairies of last chapter's medieval texts. Peter Pan is born of an entirely different mindset: one of curiosity, of fascination with fairies and with the world to which they belong. It was exactly this attitude and this era that produced the unique circumstances that led to the Cottingley Fairy Photographs.

In 1917 (five years after the publication of *Peter and Wendy*) two cousins, Elsie Wright (then sixteen) and Frances Griffiths (ten years old) staged photographs of fairies using cardboard cut-outs posed amongst the plants in their garden in Cottingley. The girls claimed to have encountered fairies in their garden and to have taken photographs of them, a claim which they

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[104] Barrie, p. 137

[105] Barrie, p. 226

maintained until the 1980s. The pictures came to the attention of Sir Arthur Conan Doyle, a firm believer in the supernatural, and from there became widespread. There was much skepticism, but there was also a not insubstantial amount of belief and credulity given to the girls and their fairies.[106]

Much time could be (and has been) spent discussing the cultural impact of the Cottingely photographs. Suffice to say, the circumstances of the Cottlingey photographs themselves are a perfect example of the era which spawned Peter Pan. The attitudes towards fairies had changed so much that now, rather than acting as a source of fear, fairies themselves had become the lure. Elsie and Frances went off on their own in search of fairies, with no prompting, and in the true, scientific tradition that had marked the 19th century they set out not just to find fairies but to definitively photograph and record them. It seems somewhat unlikely that their intent was to hoodwink the nation, but the fact that they did was made possible by England's deep-seated, post-industrial longing for fairies. In the three hundred and twenty-five years since the creation of *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, fairies had become both widely disbelieved, and widely desired for that disbelief. Only once the world had lost its fairies did people begin to realize how much they missed them.

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[106] Sanderson, S.F. "The Cottingley Fairy Photographs: A Re-Appraisal of the Evidence." *Folklore*. 84.2 (1973): 89-103. Print.

# Chapter 3

So far we have discussed fairies from the Middle Ages, fairies from the time of Shakespeare, and gone as late as fairies from the beginning of the 20th century. However, if we wish to bring our examination of fairies into the modern day, we cannot possibly ignore the genre of fantasy, nor the works that fall within its borders. A discussion of the fantasy genre, its parameters, its definitions, and its origins, could (and does) fill books; it is not my intention to write on the genre as a whole, nor to speculate on its nature. Suffice to say that, in the three centuries between Shakespeare and Barrie, while there was certainly no shortage of fairy literature, neither was it concentrated and cumulative in such a way as it would become with the advent of the fantasy genre. Though a young genre, fantasy has inevitably grown and changed a great deal in its short lifespan. One thing, however, which one sees often throughout fantasy (though not, of course, in *all* fantasy) is the appropriation, and I do not intend the word in a negative sense, of folklore and myth; stories and characters, figures and tropes, which far predate the genre itself. Often this appropriation is done with little regard for tradition; a mythical figure is easily plucked from his myth and transplanted into a new story, stripped of any ties the author does not find useful, and instead mixed with other, similar figures and given new attributes and characteristics, blending many traditions into one. It is therefore natural that one should find in a number of fantasy works the presence, explicit or otherwise, of fairies. This, by itself, is no surprise; fairies have been a persistent presence, in one form or another, in English literature for the past six or seven hundred years if not longer (the manuscript containing *Sir Orfeo*, at least, has been dated to ca. 1330). However, especially in recent modern fantasy, the fairies which figure are not those of the post-medieval tradition which dominated so much of the past several

centuries. These fairies harken back to older traditions, some more mythical — as in the Irish Sidhe— and some more literary or folkloric; in either case, these fairies have more in common with *Tam Lin*'s Fairy Queen and *Sir Gawain*'s Green Knight than they do with Barrie's Tinkerbell or Shakespeare's Peaseblossom. In order to more deeply explore this new breed of fairies we will examine two works of modern fantasy, seemingly very different from each other: Neil Gaiman's chidlren's novella *Coraline*, published in 2002, and Susanna Clarke's historical fantasy tome, *Jonathan Strange & Mr. Norrell,* published in 2004. These new old fairies are designed to bring something back to the world which had been lost along with the advent of the post-medieval fairies: the powerful unknown. In many ways these modern fairies are very much in the same tradition as the medieval ones; the major differences, the changes in which one can see the intervening years and the way the world has changed, lie in their relationship with the human protagonist. In the medieval texts, as we have discussed before, the fairies served as a representation of the unknown made more manageable, one which could be effectively defended against. In the post-medieval texts, that unknown became something to be explored, understood and civilised. These modern texts occupy a space somewhere in the middle of these two extremes; protagonists who have spent their lives in a highly man-made, civilised world, find themselves longing for an element of the wild unknown. They act on this longing and seek out the fairies (in one form or another), desiring not to subdue and civilise them but rather to bring that fay wildness back into their world with them. Ultimately, though, they find it to be more powerful, and more importantly far more dangerous, than they had anticipated; the fairies come out as a dark, atavistic version of the protagonist, one which the civilised hero is ill-equipped to handle. However, before examining these texts we would do best to look back a bit to fantasy in

a more nascent form, and the works of one of its founding fathers, so to speak: J.R.R. Tolkien, writer of the seminal novels *The Hobbit* and *The Lord of the Rings*. Though the mythology, both new and old, in Tolkien's world of Middle-Earth is extensive, however, it is perhaps not the best source for fairies. For that we would do better to look to his non-fiction work, the essay entitled "On Fairy Stories".

Much of this work deals with fairy stories in a broad sense which often refers to fantastic fiction as a whole, but especially in the beginning of the essay he writes at some length both of his opinion on the current state of fairies and how he believes they ought to be represented in fiction. He speaks of his early and abiding distaste for diminutive fairies, saying "Drayton's *Nymphidia* is one ancestor of that long line of flower-fairies and fluttering sprites with antennae that I so disliked as a child, and which my children in their turn detested… The business began, as I have said, long before the nineteenth century, and long ago achieved tiresomeness."[107] From here Tolkien becomes more concerned with the nature of fairy-stories, but we can glean something of his opinion on what a true fairy ought to be from his oft-repeated name for the land of Faerie itself: the Perilous Realm. Tolkien conceives of Faerie as a place of danger, and he describes true fairy-stories as being concerned primarily with "the *aventures* of men in the Perilous Realm or upon its shadowy marches."[108] Real fairy-stories then, according to Tolkien, are tales of mortals adventuring in Faerie. This casts in an interesting light a brief remark in the narration of Tolkien's novel, *The Hobbit*. Tolkien writes of Bilbo Baggins, the protagonist, whose mother was a Took:

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[107] Tolkien, p. 111

[108] Tolkien, p. 113

> It was often said (in other families) that long ago one of the Took ancestors must have taken a fairy wife. That was, of course, absurd, but certainly there was still something not entirely hobbitlike about them, and once in a while members of the Took-clan would go and have adventures.[109]

This, then, reflects Tolkien's conception of Faerie and its inhabitants as being the place (and the stuff) of adventures, and this is certainly a trend we see not only in *Coraline* and *Jonathan Strange*, which could be considered to owe something of themselves, perhaps, to Tolkien, but also in the medieval texts. Tolkien goes on in his description of fairy-stories above to say, "If elves are true, and really exist independently of our tales about them, then this also is certainly true: elves are not primarily concerned with us, nor we with them. Our fates are sundered, and our paths seldom meet. Even upon the borders of Faerie we encounter them only at some chance crossing of the ways."[110] It is clear, then, why Tolkien so detests fairies and fairy-worlds such as are seen in *Peter Pan*, for instance; for these things owe almost all of their substance, like Neverland, to the imagination of humanity. One gets the impression that everything about their lives is intimately bound up with those of mortals. Tolkien says of fairies, "It is man who is, in contrast to fairies, supernatural (and often of diminutive stature); whereas they are natural, far more natural than he."[111] Fairies in the bulk of the post-medieval tradition cannot be said to truly meet this definition, as they are not tied to nature, unknown and unknowable, but to the fleeting fancy of man. The fairies and fairy land of *Peter Pan*, after all, are born entirely of the laughter and imagination of human children. How much exactly of fantasy is owed to Tolkien is a matter for debate and varies from author to author, as it must. Nevertheless it cannot be denied that the

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[109] Tolkien, J.R.R. *The Hobbit*. 4th. New York: Houghton Mifflin, 1996. Print. p. 11

[110] Tolkien, "On Fairy Stories". p. 113

[111] Tolkien, p. 110

fairy figures, whether or not they are explicitly named as such, in *Coraline* and *Jonathan Strange* seem to have a great deal more in common with Tolkien's notion of what a fairy ought to be than they do with Shakespeare's, let alone Barrie's. This becomes clear through a closer examination, which we shall begin first with Neil Gaiman's novella *Coraline*.

*Coraline* tells the story of the titular character, Coraline Jones, a young girl who moves to a new flat in an old house during her summer vacation before school. Bored without playmates and brushed off by her busy parents, Coraline discovers a mysterious door in her drawing room which leads her to a secret world occupied by a slightly different version of her house, where she meets her other mother and other father, who appear similar to her normal parents but with shiny black buttons for eyes. The other parents are completely devoted to her, giving her everything she could ask for her and loving her constantly and overtly. All, however, is not as it seems, and the other mother turns out to be a far more sinister figure than Coraline could have ever suspected.

Again, as in *Gawain and the Green Knight*, the fairy figure in *Coraline* is not specifically named as a fairy. She is the other mother, also referred to by the ghost children Coraline meets as the "beldam"[112], an archaic term for an old woman or a witch. In examining the other mother of *Coraline*, it is important to remember the recurring traits and habits of the medieval fairies of chapter one (especially those which they subsequently lost in chapter two), one of the most significant of which was an uncanny doubling, a strong similarity on the part of the fairy and the fairy-world to the protagonist and his mortal world, but with subtle differences. This we see in spades in *Coraline*, starting with Coraline's entry into the other world.

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[112] Gaiman, Neil. *Coraline*. 2nd ed. New York: HarperTrophy, 2003. Print. p. 79

> Coraline walked down the corridor uneasily. There was something very familiar about it. The carpet beneath her feet was the same carpet they had in her flat. The wallpaper was the same wallpaper they had. The picture hanging in the hall was the same that they had hanging in their hallway at home. She knew where she was: she was in her own home. She hadn't left. She shook her head, confused. She stared at the picture hanging on the wall: no, it wasn't exactly the same. The picture they had in their own hallway showed a boy in old-fashioned clothes staring at some bubbles. But now the expression on his face was different — He was looking at the bubbles as if he was planning to do something very nasty indeed to them.[113]

Freud writes that, "The 'uncanny is that class of the terrifying which leads back to something long known to us, once familiar." Or, put another way, the uncanny is the familiar made unfamiliar. The fairy figures of chapter one frequently demonstrated this uncanniness, appearing in many respects just like human beings, often just like the specific protagonist; however, upon closer inspection they prove to be slightly skewed or off. Coraline's entrance into the other house strongly evokes this specific definition of uncanniness. At first, Coraline believes she has not left her home; everything is so familiar, mimicking her house almost perfectly. Almost. By subtly changing the content of the painting, Gaiman has rendered the familiar (Coraline's house) unfamiliar, making it clear that this place which seems known is, in fact, unknown. By changing the boy's intent to one of malice rather than making a neutral change, Gaiman signals that this new place which lurks under the facade of Coraline's house is a dangerous one in which she could potentially come to harm. The other mother's introductory description only serves to heighten the uncanniness:

> "A woman stood in the kitchen with her back to Coraline. She looked a little like Coraline's mother. Only… Only her skin was white as paper. Only she was taller and thinner. Only her fingers were too long, and they never stopped moving, and her dark red

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[113] Gaiman, p. 25

> fingernails were curved and sharp. 'Coraline?' the woman said. 'Is that you?' And then she turned around. Her eyes were big black buttons."[114]

The other mother is similar to Coraline's real mother, familiar enough that she does not appear as a stranger to Coraline, but at the same time is not identical; Coraline can clearly tell, even before she sees the button eyes, that the other mother is not her mother. In spite of this, though, she eats the other mother's food and enjoys the activities provided for her. The other mother invites her to take part in this forever, and asks in exchange only that Coraline allow the other mother to sew buttons into her eyes. This brings back the aspect of Freud's "Das Unheimliche" dealing with the removal of eyes, which we discussed in chapter one.[115] Freud, however, says that Jentsch's (the author of an earlier paper on the uncanny to which Freud refers) point of intellectual uncertainty relating to the feeling of uncanniness has nothing to do with the effect which the removal of eyes produces.[116] I am inclined to disagree, especially within the context of *Coraline*. In the world of *Coraline*'s other mother, nothing is as it appears. The eyes, as our main means of perception, are also the method by which we perceive the truth. This perception of truth is what allows us to be intellectually certain, dispelling, to a degree, the sensation of uncanniness. By removing the eyes and replacing them with buttons, the lie which is the other mother and her world becomes the truth because Coraline, robbed of her eyes, is unable to perceive otherwise. As Coraline becomes more and more unwilling to accept the other mother, she becomes less and less a double of Coraline's true mother, her world a more and more shoddy copy of Coraline's true world.

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[114] Gaiman, pp. 25-26

[115] See chapter one, page 21

[116] Freud, p. 7

As in the medieval texts, the doubling is not just limited to the fairy; the world itself is a copy of Coraline's, only through a glass, darkly. Perhaps one of the best examples is that of Mr. Bobo, the man who lives upstairs from Coraline, and his mice. In the real world, Mr. Bobo is training mice to perform to music in a circus. Though Coraline never sees the mice in person, they seem to have some knowledge of her (knowledge which Mr. Bobo does not appear to possess) as well as a benevolent interest in her. Before she is even aware that the door to the other house opens onto anything more than a brick wall, Mr. Bobo delivers a message to her from the mice. "'The message is this. *Don't go through the door.*' He paused. 'Does that mean anything to you?'"[117]. Like everything else from Coraline's world, Mr. Bobo has a double in the other house; however, instead of trained mice, he keeps large, black, rats with glowing red eyes. Rats, like mice, are rodents that are generally perceived as pests (however both can also be kept as pets). They infest people's dwellings and eat their food. Rats, however, are larger, more powerful, and thus more threatening. They are associated with uncleanliness, disease, and urban rot and decay. They are, in many senses, a darker and more sinister version of mice, in keeping with the theme of the other house as a darker and more sinister copy of Coraline's home. The large, black rats of the other house would carry negative associations when contrasted with Mr. Bobo's mice even without their supernaturally glowing red eyes.

The uncanny doubling exhibited by *Coraline*'s other mother is not the only trait she shares in common with more medieval fairies: she is also a thief of mortals, primarily children, but also loved ones, and her intent in taking them is clearly malicious. When Coraline first comes to the other house, the other mother fulfills her every wish, trying her hardest to get

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[117] Gaiman, p. 14

Coraline to stay with her. However, for whatever reason, she is unable to keep Coraline there by force, so in order to coerce her, the other mother kidnaps Coraline's parents. Coraline goes for some time without her parents, preparing her own food and looking after herself, and so we know when she does venture back into the other world to rescue them that it is out of love. In much the same way that the Fairy King's theft of Heurodys in *Sir Orfeo* draws Orfeo away from his court and into the unknown wilds to pursue her (this is his function in the story, whether or not it was his intent), the other mother has stolen Coraline's parents in order to bring the protagonist back into her (the other mother's) world. At one point, the other mother tells Coraline that she loves her. "And despite herself, Coraline nodded. It was true: the other mother loved her. But she loved Coraline as a miser loves money, or a dragon loves its gold. In the other mother's button eyes, Coraline knew that she was a possession, nothing more."[118] The other mother wishes to possess Coraline for much the same reason as the Fairy King in *Orfeo* steals Heurodys, as a pleasant and entertaining trinket or bauble. Like the medieval fairies she manifests her otherness not (at least not at first) in a physical difference from humans, but in a difference of character. The other mother, for all she desires Coraline, does not love her as her true, human mother does.

When Coraline continues to refuse the other mother's advances, she is imprisoned behind the mirror in a twisted sort of time-out. Here she encounters the trapped souls of three other children from the past who were lured away from home by the other mother, whom they call the beldam (this brings to mind the cat's thoughts on the other mother's motivations from earlier in the book: "'She wants something to love, I think,' said the cat. 'Something that isn't her. She

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[118] Gaiman, p.104

might want something to eat as well.'"[119]) The children, whose memories of themselves are slowly being eroded by time, explain to her what the other mother did to them. "'She left us here,' said one of the voices. 'She stole our hearts, and she stole our souls, and she took our lives away, and she left us here, and she forgot about us in the dark.'"[120] The state of these children, stolen and stripped of their flesh, brings to mind the fate of Tam Lin (had Janet not stepped in to save him): taken in his youth by the Fairy Queen to live in Faerie under the earth, without Janet's help Tam Lin would have been offered up as the tithe to hell, an offering which the text suggests would involve the removal of his flesh.[121] Tam Lin is enticed by Fairie, much as the ghostly children were enticed by the promises of the beldam; however, he now fears for his life, specifically because he is so 'fu o flesh'. These children, with no one to rescue them, have been stripped of their flesh and rendered incorporeal, unable to escape.

This brings us to another traditional role of fairies which was largely abandoned in the post-medieval era: keepers of the dead. As was discussed in previous chapters, there is ample evidence to interpret Tam Lin's fall from his horse and subsequent travel to the fairy land as death, and in *Orfeo,* between the mythic parallels (in the original Greek, Eurydice dies and goes to the underworld, but in *Orfeo* she is stolen and taken to Fairie) and the dead men in the Fairy King's courtyard, among other things, the notes of death are even more overt. There is ample folkloric evidence as well for a strong relationship between fairies and ghosts.[122] The fairies in the medieval texts, however, come off as slightly more benign than the other mother due to a

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[119] Gaiman, p. 63

[120] Gaiman, p. 82

[121] See Chapter 1, p. 21

[122] Briggs, K.M. "The Fairies and the Realms of the Dead." *Folklore*. 81.2 (1970): 81-96. Print

reversal of the order of events: in *Orfeo* men die and are taken to the Fairy King's courtyard by magic[123]; in *Coraline* the children are brought to the other world by magic, if not explicitly called magic, and then they die. The Fairy King is not, as far as we know, responsible for the deaths of those in his courtyard; he only gathers them in to form his gruesome collection post-mortem.

*Coraline* also shares something a bit more abstract with the three medieval texts of chapter one, something which is not seen in *A Midsummer Night's Dream* or in *Peter Pan*; this is the means by which Faerie is entered (which, for our purposes, we can broaden to mean simply the land which the fairies occupy primarily, so as to include places such as Gawain's ultimate destination in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, as well as the other mother's house in *Coraline*). In each of the medieval texts, Faerie is ultimately reached via a journey, however lengthy, through the unknown. In *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, Gawain sets out from Camelot in his search for the Green Chapel months in advance; without a map or any knowledge of the Green Chapel's location, he spends much of this time wandering blindly in the wilderness, inquiring of anyone he meets if they know where the Green Chapel might be.[124] Ultimately he comes out on the other side of this journey and arrives at the castle of Sir Bertilak, who, unbeknownst to Gawain, is the Green Knight. Similarly, in *Sir Orfeo* Faerie is reached via a hole or cleft in a rock through which Orfeo travels three miles before reaching the other side[125]. Similarly, in *Tam Lin*, though Janet never travels to Fairie herself, we know that it is located underground beneath a green hill. These are distinctly different methods of ingress from those of

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[123] "Sir Orfeo", vv. 389-404

[124] Armitage, vv. 703-5

[125] "Sir Orfeo", vv. 348-350

chapter two. In *A Midsummer Night's Dream* the lovers set out from Athens deliberately, heading directly for the forest outside the city limits and arriving in short order. They know its location exactly. In *Peter Pan* there is a hint of uncertainty as the Darling children follow Peter to Neverland; Peter, however, who acts as their guide, always knows where he's going. Moreover, as soon as they arrive at Neverland they immediately find parts of it that they recognize: John's flamingo with the broken leg, Michael's cave, and Wendy's wolf cub, among others.[126] Compare, then, Coraline's journey into the other house with those from the earlier texts. "Coraline put her hand on the doorknob and turned it; and, finally, she opened the door. It opened on to a dark hallway. The bricks had gone as if they'd never been there. There was a cold, musty smell coming through the open doorway: it smelled like something very old and very slow."[127] Coraline's journey is short, but distinctly in the medieval tradition. The door she uses opens onto a hall where previously there had been bricks; the hallway itself is dark and cold, and smells of something mysterious and unknown ("something very old and very slow"). Her second trip is even more marked by these attributes. "The candle cast huge, strange, flickering shadows along the wall. She heard something moving in the darkness— beside her or to one side of her, she could not tell. It seemed as if it was keeping pace with her, whatever it was."[128] Coraline travels through a corridor of the unknown inhabited by similarly mysterious beings, with, at least the first time, no knowledge of where she is going.

It is important, however, to note the differences as well as the similarities. After all, though *Coraline* may harken back to an older, more medieval tradition of fairies, no work is

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[126] See Chapter 2, p. 51

[127] Gaiman, p. 24

[128] Gaiman, p. 57

created in a bubble, and the popular conception of fairies for the last four hundred years is difficult to completely ignore. Though *Coraline*'s other mother has many things in common with the fairies of chapter one, she does appear at first glance to be missing one: a connection to the natural world. Though not explicitly remarked upon at first (as Coraline spends most of her time inside the other house rather than exploring the grounds), it becomes clear on her second trip that there is, in fact, no nature at all in the world of the other mother. In her quest for her parents, Coraline leaves the other house and heads into the woods around it. "The trees (became) cruder and less treelike the farther you went. Pretty soon they seemed very approximate, like the idea of trees: a grayish-brown trunk below, a greenish splodge of something that might have been leaves above. Coraline wondered if the other mother wasn't interested in trees,"[129]. The other mother has barely bothered to include trees in her world, whereas Coraline's real world includes not only trees but fields and "distant purple hills".[130] In this way, the other mother has more in common perhaps with *Peter Pan*, her world molded from the protagonist's imagination rather than from nature.

But what if we take a less literal view of nature? Yes, the other world is devoid of natural flora and fauna; however, part of the fairy association with nature is also an association with the wild, the unknown, and specifically things that are ancient, naturally occurring, and not under human control. Consider Coraline's description of the corridor between worlds as she flees the other mother for the final time. "Whatever that corridor was was older by far than the other mother. It was deep, and slow, and it knew that she was there…"[131] Similarly, when Coraline

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[129] Gaiman, p. 70

[130] Gaiman, p. 28

[131] Gaiman, p. 134

speaks with the cat she asks if the other mother made the other world, prompting the cat to give (in true feline fashion) a rather ambiguous response: "Made it, found it—what's the difference?"[132] These passages suggest that the other world itself, serving in the text as an unspoken analogue for Faerie, is older even than the other mother, painting a picture of something ancient and primordial, almost chthonic in nature. As man is to nature, so the other mother is to the other world: a tenant, molding and shaping to her purpose, but not truly possessing. The fairy world itself is deeper, older, and more wild than she.

If we do, then, treat the other world as something natural and wild, something not of mankind, then Coraline's actions immediately upon returning from her first visit take on a new and greater significance. After arriving home in her real house she attempts and fails to replace the key in its hiding place. Following this, "Coraline went to the freezer and took out the spare loaf of frozen bread in the bottom compartment. She made herself some toast, with jam and peanut butter… When it began to get dark, Coraline microwaved herself a frozen pizza. Then Coraline watched television… She ate canned spaghetti for breakfast." After this she goes to visit Misses Spink and Forcible, who give her a glass of limeade. "The limeade was very interesting. It didn't taste anything like limes. It tasted bright green and vaguely chemical. Coraline liked it enormously."[133] Coraline returns from her unsettling encounter with the other world and immediately combats its lingering influence with copious amounts of man-made products. She makes toast from frozen bread, microwaves herself a frozen pizza, watches television, eats canned spaghetti, and drinks artificial limeade which is specifically divorced from any natural connection it ought to have, tasting instead 'vaguely chemical'. Fairies,

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[132] Gaiman, p. 73

[133] Gaiman, pp. 47-48

especially those more in the folkloric or medieval traditions, have a long-standing relationship with man-made, homely things, such as bread, milk, or iron. In most (though not all, as is often the case with folklore) cases these things are inimical to them. For instance, in Child ballad variant B of *Tam Lin*, when Tam Lin commands Janet to dip him in "a stand o milk;"[134] in order to dispel the fairy magic. Because the other mother and other world of *Coraline* are in the old fairy tradition their influence can be resisted via these artifacts of civilisation.

One final note, perhaps, dealing not with the other mother and her connection to medieval fairies, but rather with Coraline and her link to the medieval mortal protagonists. The heroes of the medieval texts were, with one exception, knights (and though Janet is not a knight she plays roughly the same role); the stories are largely composed of their wanderings into the wilderness, away from the civilisation of home, court, and castle, seeking adventure. These wanderings, however, are reactions to the provocations of the fairy element; their primary motive is not to seek glory but to defend their world. Coraline follows in this tradition somewhat, but much as the fairy's bane, once cold iron, has been updated into microwaved pizza and chemical-tasting limeade, so the questing knight has become something new to fit a new age: the explorer. "'I do hope she (Miss Spink) doesn't get lost… you'd have to be an explorer to find your way around in this fog.' 'I'm an explorer,' said Coraline."[135] "*I'm an explorer*, thought Coraline to herself. *And I need all the ways out of here that I can get. So I shall keep walking*." "'And what do you think you're doing?' … 'I'm exploring,' said Coraline to the cat."[136] These are just some of the

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[134] "The Child Ballads: 39. Tam Lin." Variant B, v. 34

[135] Gaiman, p. 13

[136] Gaiman, p. 71

instances on which Coraline styles herself as an explorer before setting off into the unknown in search of adventure, just as her medieval counterparts did.

There remains, however, one substantial difference, lying primarily in the mechanism of the story and the fairies within it. In each of the medieval texts, the fairies act as catalysts of sorts, sparking action, moving the hero away from civilisation and what they know; the Fairy King kidnaps Heurodys, Tam Lin impregnates Janet, the Green Knight challenges Gawain. The fairies begin the action, allowing the protagonists to finish it. This is not the case in *Coraline*. Before ever any supernatural influence makes itself known, Coraline, entirely under her own impetus, seeks out the key, unlocks the door, and enters Faerie of her own free will. Only once she has learned of its dangers must she be forced back in through leverage; she, not the other mother, initiates the action. Much like the incident of the Cottingley Fairies mentioned at the end of the previous chapter, in which the girls sought fairies, unprompted, on their own, so the protagonists of the modern age no longer need to be coaxed or prodded away from their world and into Faerie. Rather than being drawn away by fairies, they actively seek them of their own accord; this is the case in *Coraline*, and, as we will see, it is the case in *Jonathan Strange & Mr. Norrell* as well, another text which relies more heavily on medieval fairies and on Tolkien's ideas of Faerie than on anything in the more modern, post-medieval tradition.

*Jonathan Strange & Mr. Norrell*, by Susanna Clarke, is as overt in its use of fairies as *Coraline* is subtle. The events of the novel take place between 1806 and 1816 and tell the story of two magicians, the titular characters, attempting to revive practical English magic, which has lain dormant for some centuries at the time the story begins. The two, however, entertain very different opinions on this revival, particularly as it relates to the employment of fairies in magic

(the conservative Mr. Norrell being against it, where the younger, newer Jonathan Strange believes it to be imperative), as well as the legendary magician king of northern England, the Raven King, John Uskglass. Where Gaiman draws upon a resurgence of more sinister fairy themes to fuel his other mother without making use of any fairy traditions or lore by name, Clarke's fairies are called upon by name and brought nearly whole and fully formed out of the pre-Shakespearean past.

The main fairy character, though others are mentioned or briefly seen, is referred to only as the gentleman with the thistle-down hair, which is to say that his hair is of a pure silver-white quality. He is the king of a fairy kingdom known as Lost-Hope, and first enters the story early on when Mr. Norrell, eager to increase his fame (and thereby the fame of English magic) in London, summons the gentleman in order to resurrect a young lady of the aristocracy (Lady Pole), recently dead. In exchange, the Gentleman requests that he be allowed to aid Mr. Norrell in all further magical endeavors. Norrell, reluctant to deal with a fairy in the first place, refuses. The fairy agrees to instead take half of Lady Pole's life in payment, and as a token of this agreement takes from her the little finger on her left hand. However, where Norrell had imagined she would live a full thirty-five years (the given time) among mortals, appear to die, and then spend her remaining thirty-five years with the gentleman, the truth of the bargain is less pleasant: she spends her days with her husband and family, but her nights she spends dancing with the gentleman in his castle at Lost-Hope. This, among other things, brings him into continual conflict with the magician protagonists, making him the antagonist of the novel, in classic fairy tradition.

Everything about the characterization of the gentleman, from the broad strokes to the minute details, smacks of the older, medieval style of fairies. However, where Gaiman's use of fairy traditions in *Coraline* makes much use of the sense of uncanny doubling so often present between fairies and mortals, Clarke's work (though not utterly devoid of this) draws more heavily on a different element; to wit, the connection between fairies and nature or the land, and specifically the way that this aspect of their nature is at odds with, often an assault on, man-made civilisation[137]. This is present from the beginning and can be seen in the very name of the primary fairy character: the gentleman with the *thistle-down* hair. Several different characters who encounter him independently of each other describe him in this way, equating his most prominent physical feature with a naturally occurring, growing substance, and moreover one for which mankind has no use— unlike, for instance, flax or cotton. More than this, though, he is from his introduction marked in similar fashion: "Suddenly there was something green where nothing green had been before and a fresh, sweet smell as of woods and fields wafted through the room…He was dressed exactly like any other gentleman, except that his coat was of the brightest green imaginable – the colour of leaves in early summer."[138] Without fail nearly every description of the gentleman employs some form of natural imagery (not to mention that his leaf-green coat is a traditional fairy garment). This sort of description appears to be applied to all fairies, not just the gentleman; when Stephen Black, the servant of Sir Walter Pole of whom the gentleman becomes fond, is taken to the revels at Lost-Hope, he dances with a beautiful woman

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[137] It is important to note that, while the post-Shakespearean fairies do exist in counter to the civilized world, their contrast is more an affront than an assault; they thumb their nose at the man-made world, where the fairies of the medieval texts boldly attack it; the fairies of *Jonathan Strange* are most definitely in the style of the second camp.

[138] Clarke, Susanna. *Jonathan Strange & Mr. Norrell.* 2nd. New York: Bloomsbury, 2004. Print. p. 90

who wears a gown "the colour of storms, shadows and rain"[139]. The greater part of this relationship between fairies, fairy magic and the natural world in *Jonathan Strange* is not limited to passive descriptors of the fairies themselves, though. The gentleman on numerous occasions openly displays his disdain for the world of men and its laws, saying at one point to Stephen: "The laws of Great Britain! Pish tush! I thought you would have understood by now that the laws of Great Britain are nothing but a flimsy testament to the idle wishes and dreams of mankind."[140] The world of the gentleman, the world of Faerie, provides a clear and deliberate contrast to the world of men, and not only a contrast but often an attack as well. Many times when the gentleman spirits Stephen away to Lost-Hope via magic, he does so by transforming the environment around him from London to Faerie — at least, this is how it appears to Stephen. One early instance of this is particularly telling:

> The stout gentleman opened his eyes wide in fright, anger and indignation. He opened his mouth wide to begin accusing Stephen but in that moment he began to change. His body became the trunk of a tree; he suddenly sprouted arms in all directions and all the arms became branches; his face became a bole and he shot up twenty feet; where his hat and umbrella had been there was a thick crown of ivy…Piccadilly was changing too. A carriage happened to be passing. It clearly belonged to someone of importance for as well as the coachman upon his box, two footmen rode behind; there was a coat of arms upon the door and it was drawn by four matched greys. As Stephen watched the horses grew taller and thinner until they seemed about to disappear entirely and at that point they were suddenly transformed into a grove of delicate silver birches. The carriage became a holly bush and the coachman and the footmen became an owl and two nightingales which promptly flew away. The gas lamps that hung above the street were sucked up into the sky and became stars in a fretwork of winter trees and Piccadilly itself dwindled to a barely discernible path through a dark winter wood. (Clarke, 171)

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[139] Clarke, p. 162

[140] Clarke, p. 793

The gentleman with the thistle-down hair's magic is a direct assault by nature on the heart of the man-made world: downtown London. The trappings of civilisation such as the elaborate stagecoach and footmen are transformed into wild, natural things such as trees and animals. Interestingly, the horses and a passing dog suffer the same fate. Though they are animals they are also domesticated, and as such can be seen to have renounced their state as creatures of the wild and become aspects of the man-made world.

Even minor fairies who feature in the book only in an indirect way via the in-world folklore that Clarke has constructed follow this trend of behavior. At one point Norrell tells a story to Strange of a fairy which, for whatever reason, was tormenting a small town. Among other things, the fairy causes a wood to grow up in the market square, preventing the townspeople from conducting business.[141] In this way the fairy strikes at the civilised heart of the town, its center of business, with wildness and nature.

This relationship with the wild is not limited just to fairies, though. Those human beings who have a closeness, even if it is an unwitting one, to fairies and fairy magic enjoy such a relationship as well. Another prominent fairy character in the novel is John Uskglass, the Raven King and the ruler of northern England for three hundred years starting in 1110 AD, when he invades England with a fairy host at his back. Though not technically a fairy, the Raven King was raised from childhood in the court of a fairy king and employs fairy magic; on top of this he enjoys a deep connection with the natural landscape of England. Vinculus, a vagrant and charlatan sorcerer in the time in which the main events of *Jonathan Strange* take place, is tasked through an unlikely series of events in childhood to deliver a prophecy of the Raven King to the

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[141] Clarke, p. 394

two magicians. He acts as the Raven King's servant or emissary, and when Jonathan Strange first encounters him he is waking from sleep under a hedge. "The man extracted himself from the hedge. This was no easy task because various parts of it – hawthorn twigs, elder branches, strands of ivy, mistletoe and witches' broom – had insinuated themselves among his clothes, limbs and hair during the night or glued themselves to him with ice."[142] Vinculus is a vehicle of an older, more wild sort of magic, and as such the plants naturally cling to him, recognizing a kinship in him which could never be seen in someone like Mr. Norrell who hides himself away in libraries and wears a starched wig. Note the word choice used to describe the manner in which the plants affix themselves to Vinculus: they do not cling, grasp, or wrap, but rather insinuate themselves, implying a slow, natural process as if Vinculus were a part of the landscape itself.

Perhaps the scene which best sums up the relationship between civilisation and fairies, among other things, is Jonathan Strange's visit to the ailing king, George III. The king's sons summon Strange in the hope that Strange might be able to cure his majesty's madness through magic, though Strange has little hope. However, unbeknownst to the magician, the gentleman with the thistle-down hair is visiting as well, and attempts to lure them both from the castle grounds into Faerie via an enchantment. "Strange was mystified. The music seemed to be leading the King in the direction of a grove of trees. At least Strange had supposed it was a grove… But now the grove had become a thicket – no, a wood – a deep, dark wood where the trees were ancient and wild. Their great branches resembled twisted limbs and their roots tumbling nests of snakes… Pale pinpricks of light deep within the wood suggested a house where no house ought to be."[143] The forests of fairy are 'ancient and wild', and their trees are

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[142] Clarke, p. 214

[143] Clarke, p. 388

best described with sinister, threatening metaphors comparing their branches to human limbs and their roots to poisonous serpents. Though Strange sees lights which suggest there might be a house (most probably Lost-Hope), the forest is a place "where no house ought to be". The house is the ultimate embodiment of homeliness and civilisation; it has no business existing in Faerie, the heart and expression of untamed wildness. The narration says as much shortly afterwards, once Strange has dispelled the enchantment that had begun to make the wood and house seem warm and welcoming. "The wood no longer struck Strange as a welcoming place. It appeared to him now as it had at first — sinister, unknowable, *unEnglish*."[144] This one sentence says a great deal about the relationship between Faerie and England, and indeed between fairies and mankind; fairies and everything to do with them is, as Clarke uses them and as they were in the pre-Shakespearean tradition, sinister and unknowable. To say that they are unEnglish is, within the context of the book, to say that they are not of the civilised world which Strange (at that point) inhabits, the world which he feels constitutes Englishness.

In the contrast and conflict between fairies in *Jonathan Strange*, as agents of the wild, and the agents of civilisation and the man-made world, the fairy side is not limited solely to nature. It never has been. Fairies are connected to the natural world, but in a broader sense they are connected as well to things that are unknown and unknowable; most often death, as in *Sir Orfeo,* and insanity. For instance, during Strange's visit to George III it is revealed that madmen can see fairies, even when the fairies do not wish themselves to be seen; Norrell later explains to Strange that fairies have historically had an affinity for insane persons.[145] Not only fairies, but tellingly the *Aureate* (Golden-Age) magicians as well, which is to say those whose magic was

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[144] Clarke, p. 390

[145] Clarke, p. 393

most closely derived from John Uskglass, whose magic and upbringing was in turn learned from fairies. All this is perhaps best summed up by one of Clarke's footnotes referencing imaginary works of magical scholarship.

> Richard Chaston (1620-95). Chaston wrote that men and fairies both contain within them a faculty of reason and a faculty of magic. In men reason is strong and magic is weak. With fairies it is the other way round: magic comes very naturally to them, but by human standards they are barely sane. (Clarke, 393)

This relationship between civilisation and the unknown, sanity and madness, is interestingly mixed in the character of Strange himself. From the beginning Strange is somewhat less invested in civilisation than Mr. Norrell, preferring haphazard experimentation to careful research and adventuring in the field to studying in the library. However, as the novel progresses he becomes more and more enamored of fairies and of English magic's wilder past, and more and more disenchanted with London and Norrell's way of doing things which favors research over experimentation and the quiet of a library over the roar of a battlefield. During a conversation with Sir Walter Pole, Strange expresses a desire to escape London. "'There are days when I would be away.' 'Where?' Sir Walter was surprized; there was no place he found so much to his liking as London with its gaslights and its shops, its coffeehouses and clubs, its thousand pretty women and its thousand varieties of gossip and he imagined it must be the same for everyone. 'Oh, wherever men of my sort used to go, long ago. Wandering on paths that other men have not seen. Behind the sky. On the other side of the rain.'"[146] Sir Walter, not only a man of society but a nobleman and a politician, is so thoroughly entrenched in the man-made world of the city that he cannot even imagine wanting to leave. Strange, however, is expressing the beginnings of a growing desire to explore the magical unknown, primarily in the form of

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[146] Clarke, p. 406

fairy magic and John Uskglass, and to escape his role in society. This can perhaps be considered to culminate during his time in Venice when, in order to enable himself to see fairies, he distills a tincture of madness which renders him temporarily insane.[147] The first turning point of Strange's relationship with fairies and the wild is perhaps best encapsulated, however, by something related not to madness but to the doubling which we saw in earlier texts and in *Coraline*.

The doubling in *Jonathan Strange & Mr. Norrell* has nothing like the pervasive potency it does in *Coraline*. Though the gentleman with the thistle-down hair is, admittedly, the same height as Jonathan Strange[148], there are not strong recurring parallels drawn between the two, or between Faerie and what we see of England; indeed, the two could hardly be more different, the Faerie wood being described as thoroughly "*unEnglish*".[149] No, the doubling we see here is represented not by fairies who resemble their mortal counterparts but by *mirrors*. Mirrors are, after all, in some ways the ultimate instance of an uncanny double: a perfect reflection, but reversed, backwards. From early in the book, Jonathan Strange, the character who most successfully bridges the gap between the world of men and the world of fairies, is intent on blurring the line between reflection and reality. In his second meeting with Mr. Norrell upon his arrival in London, for instance, Strange is asked to do a piece of magic. In answer, Strange causes a book on the table to switch places with its reflection, leaving only a hologram of a book sitting where the physical book had been.[150] The greatest instance of this penchant of Strange's for mirror magic, however, comes later in the book. During the discussion between Sir Walter

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[147] Clarke, p. 643

[148] Clarke, p. 277

[149] Clarke, p. 390

[150] Clarke, p. 250

Pole quoted above, Strange first expresses a desire to pass through a mirror. "'Does it not look as if one could just walk into it? It would not be so difficult I think. One could use a spell of revelation. No, of unravelling. Or perhaps both. The way would be clear before one. One step forward and away.'" [151] A short while later Strange does just this, walking into the mirror and going elsewhere, greatly perturbing his wife and friends. By passing into the mirror, Strange unites his reflection with himself, eliminating the border between the uncanny double, which is fairy, and the man. Interestingly enough, just as in the medieval texts the approach to Faerie is preceded by a journey through the unknown, once through the mirror Strange finds himself in just such a place.

> "There were canals of still water in stone embankments. The water appeared black in the gloomy light. I saw staircases that rose up so high I could not see the top of them, and others that descended into utter blackness. Then suddenly I passed under an arch and found myself upon a stone bridge that crossed a dark, empty landscape. The bridge was so vast that I could not see the end of it" … Only Strange seemed at all comfortable with these descriptions of eerie, silent halls, unending pathways, and vast, dark landscapes. Arabella was genuinely frightened by what she had heard and even Sir Walter and Colonel Grant felt decidedly unsettled. Magic, which had seemed so familiar just hours before, so *English*, had suddenly become inhuman, unearthly, *otherlandish*. (Clarke, 428)

Once Strange unites his human self with his fairy self and passes through the unknown world behind the mirror his magic itself is transformed, turning from traditional English magic to something decidedly other.

In *Jonathan Strange & Mr. Norrell*, fairies come crashing back with full force into their old roles, both as powerful, dangerous antagonists and as guardians and personifications of nature, wilderness, and the unknown. The fairies may be old, however, but the protagonists are, in many ways, a new breed. They are very much possessed of the same lust for adventure

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[151] Clarke, p. 405-6

embodied by questing knights in the medieval tradition. It seems, however, that the questing knights can rely upon the fairy element to inevitably intrude into their world and draw them out into some sort of conflict or quest, away from civilisation and into the depths of Faerie. In many ways, Jonathan Strange himself may be considered to represent both the modern reader of fairy literature and the updated form of the questing knight. As in *Coraline*, and as opposed to all the mortal protagonists of the first two chapters, Strange is not content to wait for fairies to approach him. Instead, he is intent on seeking both fairies and all incarnations of the unknown. "'To confine a magician's researches to the books in his library,'" Strange says, "'well, you might just as well tell an explorer that you approve his plan to search for the source of, of — whatever it is those African rivers are called — on the condition that he never step outside Tunbridge Wells!'"[152] Strange, like Coraline, thinks of himself as an explorer, a seeker of mysteries and adventure. And like Coraline (where her initial journey into the other world causes the other mother to kidnap her parents), this insistence on venturing into realms where he does not belong ultimately results in the loss of a loved one, after his wife, Arabella, is kidnapped by the gentleman with the thistle-down hair.

In a way these books, though they owe much of their fairy elements to the medieval traditions of *Sir Orfeo*, *Tam Lin,* and *Sir Gawain & the Green Knight* (which had so long lain dormant under the post-medieval small fairy tradition), have turned the structure of those stories on their heads. *Orfeo*, for instance, begins with the kidnapping of a loved one, forcing the main character to leave the comforts of civilisation and home and seek adventure and the unknown. *Jonathan Strange* and *Coraline*, on the other hand, feature protagonists who, by tempting fate

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[152] Clarke, p. 428

and going of their own free will into the dark, ultimately endanger their loved ones and are forced to save them. This is because the motivations of the contemporary protagonists are the reverse of those of the medieval ones. The medieval heroes of chapter one are acutely aware of the unknown which surrounds them; they spend their time working their hardest to defend against it and drive it off. The modern protagonists of *Jonathan Strange* and *Coraline*, on the other hand, welcome fairies in with open arms, looking for an adventure, something which they do not already know completely, something of which they are not entirely sure. The contemporary protagonists (that is to say, protagonists who are the products of contemporary writers. *Jonathan Strange* is, after all, set in the beginning of the 19th century; its author is a product of the late 20th), on the other hand, appear to feel, in the tradition of the Cottingley girls, that if they do not take the initiative and seek out fairies, the fairies will never come to them. Unlike the Cottingley girls, however, who were in search of small, post-medieval fairies, the fairies which these modern protagonists encounter prove a great deal more dangerous than they had expected.

# Conclusion

Fairies are complex things (as anything which exists for so long must, by necessity, be) and one could not hope to encompass all that they are in a lifetime of work, let alone such a short work as this. Nevertheless, the recurring themes and roles which fairies play in literature say a great deal about them, especially since there is no reality of fairies to contradict their portrayal; there is only the portrayal itself. We see fairies change, as anything can be expected to over the course of six centuries, but in many ways we see them stay the same as well. They are, in their most basic form, the embodiment of the unknown, to the things which mankind is unable to understand, both in the world around us and in ourselves. At the same time, being of human genesis, they reflect our changing attitudes towards that unknown. In the Middle Ages, we see Gawain riding off to defend the honor of Camelot from the challenge of the uncivilised unknown embodied by the Green Knight. In the post-medieval era, that same unknown becomes something to be understood and ultimately, just as Wendy attempts to civilise Peter, to be subdued to the will of the hero. Finally in the modern era we see heroes realize that the unknown has a place in their world after all and welcome it back in with open arms, only to realize, as Coraline does, that it is not so toothless as we thought after all. In every instance, fairies are the face we give to that unknown, the one we wish it had, whether as another knight, something small and manageably classifiable, or something beautiful and longed-for. They transform the unknown into something that we feel we can venture into after all. In every instance as well, once we enter that world we realize that the faces we give them never quite manage to mask the true face we know them to possess: that of something fierce, wild, and implacable. In the

introduction, I ask why it is that fairies so doggedly persist after more than six hundred years. The answer is simple: it is because the unknown which they represent— whether that unknown is the shadowed forests primeval of the natural world or the darker recesses of our own minds— persists. It always has, and it always will.

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