A review of

Elf Queens and Holy Friars: Fairy Beliefs and the Medieval Church

Katherine Langrish

It's refreshing to read a book about medieval fairy beliefs which is truly pan-European in range. Backing his arguments with a wealth of fascinating examples of fairy beliefs and fairy manifestations from 'Iceland to Sicily and from the Pyrenees to the Ruhr', Richard Green discusses the challenge posed by the shared fairy beliefs of the laity to the orthodoxy of the medieval church. In particular, he examines three areas of fairy belief which the church felt it necessary to rationalise, redefine or repress: attitudes to sex and pregnancy as exemplified by stories of incubi, issues of illegitimacy and usurpation found in changeling tales, and notions of fairyland as a deathless, non-Christian otherworld. 'Many of those who participated in the discourse of fairyland in the Middle Ages felt themselves under surveillance.' (8) Fairy beliefs could be subversive and politically charged.

In the first two chapters, 'Believing in Fairies' and 'Policing Vernacular Belief', Green establishes that fairy beliefs were not confined to the peasantry or to literary romances: lay people both high and low found it credible that fairies had agency in the real world. Clearly not every medieval person was prepared to believe in fairies, but clerical anxiety on the subject suggests that many of them did:

> In the mid fourteenth century John Bromyard reported that attempts to prohibit rituals for recovering stolen property (a standard activity for cunning men and women) might be met with defiance: "they say it not the work of the devil but of the fair folk [the fairies], for we haven't learnt it from the devil, nor do we believe in him, but from the fair folk." (22)

The great crusading family of Lusignan owned as ancestress the fairy Melusine, and Jean d'Arras in his romance *Melusine* (*c*.1393), written for his patron the Duc de Berri, goes to some trouble to authenticate Melusine's appearance in 1376 on the ramparts

of Lusignan three days before it was surrendered by the English to the besieging forces led by the Duc. And I had not known before that the famous knight Bertrand du Guesclin was married to a fairy! (45) Such 'true-life' stories posed difficulties for medieval churchmen whose belief system was necessarily less elastic than that of the laity, and whose options were either to deny the existence of fairies altogether, or fit them somehow into a Christian worldview. The first and earliest option, enshrined as the *Canon Episcopi* in the ninth century, had little effect in the face of hard-to-eradicate popular belief. The second option, very much a self-imposed task and not something lay people worried about until they were made to, drew churchmen into elaborate elucidatory tangles. Clerical disapproval of fairy beliefs hardened over the course of the Middle Ages: one theological handbook composed in England in the late 11th century, the *Elucidarium,* discusses good and bad angels but does not mention fairies; a later, 14th-century French version of the same work 'leaves no doubt not only that fairies exist, but also that they are quite simply devils' – or else devilish illusions. This clerical anxiety may paradoxically have preserved many fairy beliefs:

> If fairies are demons, it follows that demons, or at least some demons, are fairies, and this insight opens up a world of still largely unexplored ecclesiastical material for investigation … when we turn [from romances] to pastoral manuals, saints' lives, sermons, exempla, and miracle tales, we encounter a host of fairies masquerading as devils. (16)

That fairies were devils was not easy to establish. For one thing, though longer-lived than humans, fairies were known to die, which devils couldn't. Moreover, 'vernacular culture had no problem imagining Christian fairies' (69). The name of Jesus Christ is frequently upon the lips of the fairy king Oberon in the 13th-century romance *Huon of Bordeaux* and when he dies his soul goes to Paradise.

Green suggests that the difference between heterodox fairy beliefs and the orthodoxy of the church offered a space in which to explore issues of gender and social resistance. Fairy queens are imagined creatures of real power. Citing Chaucer, whose lightly satirical attitude towards fairy beliefs proved influential in later centuries, Green suggests that the Loathly Lady's transformation in *The Wife of Bath's Tale* 'derives much of its real power' from the fairy discourse of female sovereignty and its 'long-standing resistance to the crooked-rib propaganda' of the learned:

> Beneath its androcentric quest for what women really want … lies a much older ideological level where masculine violation of natural harmony is subject to the discipline and correction of a magical universe. (50)

Green next turns to fairy beliefs surrounding the socially and morally loaded issues of sex and inheritance. In Chapter 3, 'Incubi Fairies', he demonstrates 'that as late as the 15th century the word '"incubus" might still have been imagined as "fairy"'. Narratives of fairy lovers (or rapists) could explain physiological experiences such as sleep paralysis or nocturnal emissions. So long as such tales remained in the realm of imagination, the church, though concerned, could cope:

> Reports of women made pregnant by incubi, however, were quite another matter … After all, fairy insemination offered medieval women a convenient way to account for any pregnancy that, for whatever social reason, could not safely be attributed to a specific human father. (84)

This could hardly be ignored, especially with vernacular romances such as *Sir Launfal* positively revelling in the illicit sensuality of fairy sex. (102) Churchmen denied that incubi, defined as demons, could ever engender children. So Geoffrey of Monmouth's purportedly historical account of the parentage of Merlin, offspring of a human mother and an incubi-demon, was an embarrassment which later clerics attempted to revise or explain away, even evolving complicated theories in which demons collected human semen with which to impregnate human women. In Layamon's late 12th-century *Brut*, Merlin's father is a fairy in all but name; in a 14th-century prose version the mysterious lover is merely human: a 'faire bachilor'. 'The old story of Merlin's fairy parentage was clearly subject to considerable clerical pressure.' (94)

Chapter 4, 'Christ the Changeling', examines the significance of changeling narratives in medieval fairy tradition with especial reference to some of the English mystery plays in which the Christ child is reviled as a changeling. Green brings evidence to show that though changelings have usually been considered 'something of a rarity in works written before 1500', the concept was not foreign to the early Middle Ages. Citing a passage from the 13th-century *Ancrene Wisse* he suggests that 'changeling' should be the primary meaning of the Middle English word '*conjeoun*' (itself derived from Norman French), and that it was a deadly insult even when used as a general term of abuse, since it implied not only illegitimacy but fairy or demonic blood. (A changeling child was not even *half* human but wholly fairy.) Here was another issue which posed theological problems: if fairies were demons and demons could not engender children, what were these changelings – and where were the infants whom they had replaced? Finally in the Mystery Plays, 'three times in the Chester Plays, and once in the York Play, Christ is called a *congeoun*' (128), and the term is also directed in disgust by Herod's soldiers at the Holy Innocents in the Chester *Massacre of the Innocents*. In Herod's eyes the Christ child is an imposter, usurper, 'elvish godling' and disturber of order, and Green points out that in the apocryphal Infancy Gospels popular in the Middle Ages the child Jesus is associated with the performance of marvels:

bringing clay sparrows to life: *faring with ferlies*. (134) The mystery plays were culturally a secular phenomenon: when the holy Christ child himself is shown accused of elvish witchcraft by king and priests, what does this say? Were these plays, Green asks, undermining or reinforcing traditional beliefs? May we infer some degree of 'folkloric resistance to an increasingly authoritarian church'? (142)

In his final chapter 'Living In Fairyland', Green embarks on a closely argued investigation into the connections between the various medieval otherworlds – heaven, hell, purgatory, the earthly paradise, and fairyland. Did Arthur die? Or is he healing his wounds in Avalon? Breton, Cornish and Welsh laymen were fiercely of the latter opinion:

> Hermann of Tournai tells an amusing story about some monks from Laon visiting the Cornish town of Bodmin in 1113, one of whom fell out with a local man on the question of whether Arthur still lived: a considerable brawl arose, many armed men attacked the church, and bloodshed was only narrowly averted … (149)

Most clerical writers were sceptical – or, if they had Welsh sympathies, at least cautious. Avalon, described by Layamon as a delicious paradise presided over by a lovely fairy queen, looked like a dangerous rival to heaven. In this context Green suggests the discovery and exhumation of Arthur's grave at Glastonbury around the year 1191 was more likely an attempt by the monks to discredit stories of Arthur's survival, than a 'self-interested subterfuge' intended to raise revenue. And he argues that clerical commentators put a deliberately dark spin on the Europe-wide concept of the *familia Herlequini* or Wild Hunt. I am not entirely convinced by this, or by the distinction Green draws between the wild hunt ('die wilde Jagt') and the wild horde ('das wildes Heer'). Providing examples from Sir Orfeo of a fairy hunt and a fairy army, he suggests these are 'distinct motifs which are all too often lumped uncritically together' [172]. It seems to me that fairy kings, like ordinary kings, ride out in procession for three main purposes: ceremony, hunting or war; the Seelie Court and the Unseelie Court are aspects of the same thing, and I suspect the *familia Herlequini* had always had its frightening side. However, it could certainly be adapted to a Christian agenda. Green contrasts two of the earliest accounts. Orderic Vitalis, writing of an event 'witnessed' in 1091, depicts a grim procession of dead knights, priests, ladies and commoners suffering dreadful torments for their sins. A half-century or so later, Walter Map in *De Nugis Curialium* writes of the British king Herla who, returning from a fairy king's wedding, finds that centuries have elapsed and he and his company are doomed to wander the hills forever. Green comments, 'People

could hardly be allowed to believe that Herla and his followers (or King Arthur and his court) were living happily in fairyland.' (176)

Reading this, I was struck by the memory of Aucassin's famous defiance – 'To Hell I will go!' – in the 13th-century romance *Aucassin and Nicolette*:

> For to Hell go the fine scholars and the fair knights who are slain in the tourney and the great wars, and the good men-at-arms and all noble men. With them I will go: and there go the lovely courteous ladies who have two or three lovers as well as their lords, and there go the gold and silver and ermine and miniver, and there go the harpers and minstrels and kings of this world: I will go with them, so only that I have Nicolette my sweetest love beside me.

It's as though Aucassin has Orderic's gloomy vision of the trooping dead clearly in his mind and is deliberately subverting, diverting it. This gay cavalcade will surely end up in fairyland, not hell.

Green continues with an enquiry as to whether the medieval discourse of purgatory, especially tales of physical forays into the Christian otherworld such as the late 12th-century *Tractatus de Purgatorio Sancti Patricii*, is partly a constructed response to the tales of journeys into fairyland. And he concludes with a postscript in which he suggests that the 'comparative mildness' of the English witch hunts of the 16th and 17th centuries is due to 'an attitude of amused scepticism on the part of the ruling elite towards such popular superstitions as fairy belief' which may have been a legacy of the 'cultural prestige of the *Canterbury Tales*' : Chaucer, revered in the Middle Ages as England's Homer, 'plainly regards fairyland as an absurd delusion.' (198)

Elf Queens and Holy Friars is so densely argued, so full of fascinating stories and thought-provoking insights, so readable and so charming, that it is difficult to do it justice. There may have been a couple of places where I felt that a reference to the *Mabinogion* (cited once) might not have come amiss: but this is more than made up for by the numbers of less familiar examples Professor Green has brought together from across Europe: the text is thick with them and it's a magnificent book.

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