



'Queen Mab', illustration by  
Arthur Rackham (1906).

# The Mab of Folklore

Simon Young

## Introduction

Over some fifty years, from about 1590 to 1640, a figure named 'Mab' burst into English literature. 'Queen Mab' first appeared in a soliloquy in *Romeo and Juliet* in the early or mid-1590s: 'She's the fairies' midwife. . . ' declaimed Mercutio in one of the most famous speeches in the play.<sup>1</sup> She appeared in a masque by Ben Jonson in 1603 as a fairy monarch: she broke the fourth wall by greeting the new English queen, Anne of Denmark, in a garden at Althorp.<sup>2</sup> She was, as Oberon's wife, the heroine of Drayton's *Nymphidia* (published in 1627).<sup>3</sup> She, then, moving on in time, made briefer but interesting cameos in *L'Allegro* by Milton (where she eats junkets);<sup>4</sup> and in several poems by Herrick (in one she punished lazy maids).<sup>5</sup> She also turned up in the works of dozens of minor playwrights, poets and intellectuals in the 1600s and thereafter: Mab filtered down, too, into theological, political and occult writing.<sup>6</sup>

'Who's Queen Mab?' Benvolio asked Mercutio in *Romeo and Juliet*.<sup>7</sup> This question may have been Shakespeare's way of explaining Mab to (some of) his audience. It is certainly a pertinent question today for folklorists interested in reconstructing the Elizabethan supernatural. Who was this mysterious figure who flits in and out of some of the most celebrated texts in Elizabethan and Jacobean literature? Was she a fairy queen, as Shakespeare and 17th-century writers suggested? Was she a hag-like figure, as some more subtle readers have claimed, picking up on clues in these same poems and plays?<sup>8</sup> Or was she a literary invention: 'an invented personage';<sup>9</sup> 'the creation of Shakespeare's imagination'?<sup>10</sup> By this logic Shakespeare had conjured up a name that subsequently caught on in literary circles.

In the following pages we have recovered, as much as our sources allow, the Mab of folklore. This has been partially attempted before.<sup>11</sup> However, the approach here is an unusual one. I am *profoundly* pessimistic about defining a folklore figure on the basis of literary sources: there is so much potential for distortion, imitation, confusion and wishful thinking. This study will therefore be restricted to five points that are non-literary or that are based on literary asides. These five points are: the personal name 'Mab'; place names with the element 'Mab'; an insult from the mid- to late 1500s recorded in an early Tudor play; a chance reference in a legal source relating to events in 1601; and a Warwickshire dialect word recorded in the 1770s. Here are, make no mistake, fragmentary and difficult sources, but these are sources that liberate us from the ambiguities of literature. It is the folklore equivalent of an archaeologist deliberately ignoring problematic written sources to concentrate better on material data.<sup>12</sup>

## The Forename Mab

The proper name 'Mab', 'Mabb' or 'Mabbe' has been more written about than any other aspect of Mab folklore. Four explanations are given for its origins: three depending on 'slight name similarities'.<sup>13</sup> The first is that Mab comes from the Welsh word 'mab', meaning boy or son or child: 'it would be difficult to find any epithet more befitting ... that dwarf-like sovereign';<sup>14</sup> the problem that the word 'mab' is male is quietly passed over. The second is that Mab is an English version of the legendary Irish fairy Queen Mab, pronounced 'Maeve' (mev).<sup>15</sup> The third argument claims that Mab comes from some ill-specified 'sounds-like' confusion with Dame Abonde, a French fairy, who only appears once in early modern English literature.<sup>16</sup> The fourth possibility is that Mab is a diminutive of the English name 'Mabel'.

It is fair to say that the first two 'Celtic' explanations hold the field. These were the explanations favoured by William Thoms (1803-85), the father of British folklore, in 1847 and these are the explanations that spread, from Thoms, through Shakespeare criticism in the later 19th century and remain there in the *apparati* of *Romeo and Juliet* to this day.<sup>17</sup> They were also encouraged by Katharine Briggs who, in her *Dictionary of Fairies*, accepted that Mab 'probably comes from a Celtic strain'.<sup>18</sup> It is worth noting at this point that there is not one clear case of a Celtic supernatural name being taken up in English prior to 1800, though we perhaps have some supernatural English words adopted into Welsh.<sup>19</sup> It might also be worth remembering that since the 19th century 'the mystic Celt' has been sold as a spiritual antidote for the workaday Anglo-Saxon:<sup>20</sup> the British are fascinated by any possibility of 'Celtifying' their ghosts and bogies.

Rather than go through each of these theories as to the origin of the name 'Mab', I will look at the question from another and, I hope, more productive angle. What fairy names are typical in British literature and British folklore? English fairy names are, in 16th- and 17th-century literature, frequently snappy one-syllable words. So in a single stanza of Drayton we are introduced to Drop, Fib, Hop, Jill, Jin, Mop, Nit, Pin, Pink, Pip, Quick, Skip, Tib, Tick, Tit, Trip, Wap and Win (all female fairies).<sup>21</sup> In the roughly contemporary *Life of Robin Goodfellow*, meanwhile, the fairies of Oberon are: Grim, Gull, Licke, Lull, Patch, Pinch, Sib and Tib.<sup>22</sup> Many, perhaps all, were invented by the authors, but they were mimicking a real fairy-naming convention in Elizabethan and modern folklore.

The only difference in folklore proper is that instead of random sharp syllables, fairies (and this is perhaps particularly true of solitary fairies) are given the diminutives of well-known English proper names. Some examples from British fairy tradition follow: Billy, Bobbitt, Dick, Dob, Dobbie, Hob, Jack, Joan, Kit, Peg, Rob, Robin, Sisse, Tom and Will;<sup>23</sup> names that can usefully be paralleled in the naming of witch familiars in Britain.<sup>24</sup> This is an attempt to humanise and 're-size' the supernatural; see the way, too, that bogies were frequently referred to as 'old' (e.g. 'old Skriker').<sup>25</sup> Similar diminutives were used with animals and particularly birds in English dialect in trying for kinship with a likewise alien but ever-present reality.<sup>26</sup>

'Mab' fits, of course, very comfortably into this naming pattern. The only real mystery is that so many complicated and unnecessary suggestions for the origins of 'Mab' have dominated scholarship for so long. We have a single-syllable diminutive of a common English female name, Mabel. Mabel (or versions thereof) was established in English naming tradition from the Middle Ages; the name came ultimately from Latin *amabilia*. There is a *Mabilia* attested in the 12th century and *Mabyly* in 14th-century England. The English abbreviation 'Mabb' is recorded, meanwhile, as a proper name and as a surname from the late 1200s.<sup>27</sup> There is no need, then, to look for exotic foreign imports, particularly ones that have so little to recommend them as 'boy' in Welsh, the name 'Maeve' in Irish or a French fairy. *Mab(el)* is perfectly in line with the names typically given to English fairies.

### **Mab place names**

Many supernatural beings, for instance Hob or Puck, have places named after them: a Hob Hole, say, or a Puck Lane.<sup>28</sup> Was Mab so honoured? The first scholar who identified, at least to his own satisfaction, folklore Mab place names was Jabez Allie. Allie was optimistic about his ability to sniff out the supernatural in the landscape, but even he was able to dig up only two possible Mab names: a 'Mob's Close, or Mop's Close' at Upton Snodsbury, Worcestershire, and a 'Mobbled Peck' at Cradley in Herefordshire.<sup>29</sup> Much more recently, in 1995, James Rattue claimed that *Mab Well* (Egton), Yorkshire, 'presumably ... records the name of the mythical fairy queen'.<sup>30</sup>

I have amassed about fifty Mab and Mob<sup>31</sup> names that range from wells to hills, and from farmhouses to woods. Most of these toponyms *will* include the personal name Mab: there is little else in English that can explain the syllable. But, and this is our difficulty, with what sense? Perhaps a woman called 'Mab' was a local landowner: women's names are far rarer in the landscape than men's because female ownership was less common, but they occur.<sup>32</sup> Possibly we have here a reference to the surname 'Mab' (or some variant thereon), which comes ultimately from the name Mabel. It is notable that the spread of Mab-style surnames – which are relatively rare – seems to have been greatest historically in 'Kent, Dorset, Sussex, and Hants'.<sup>33</sup> Sussex has two *Mabb's Farms*.<sup>34</sup> There is also the possibility that we have the sense of 'Mab' as slattern or slut (for 'indelicate' street names: i.e. places where you could expect to have sex).<sup>35</sup> The one place-name survey of Mab place names known to me does not even consider the supernatural dimension.<sup>36</sup>

It is not possible to offer an in-depth study of Mab and Mob place names here. But certain toponyms set fairy bells ringing, such as *Mab Well* in Yorkshire and *Mobwell* in Buckinghamshire: springs are associated with fairies.<sup>37</sup> There appears to be no folklore recorded for *Mabb's Wood* in Kent, but it stands next to *Pookhill Wood* and *Hobb's Wood* (see Fig. 1). 'Pook' is, of course, a more unambiguously supernatural name and Mab was associated with Puck in Drayton's *Nimphidia*.<sup>38</sup> Or is this just an amusing coincidence? Stiles are associated with supernatural experiences and sometimes appear in supernatural place names: locals were doubtless, in the Middle Ages, careful walking near *Mabstegyll* (Mab's Stile) at Cudworth, Yorkshire, after dark.<sup>39</sup>

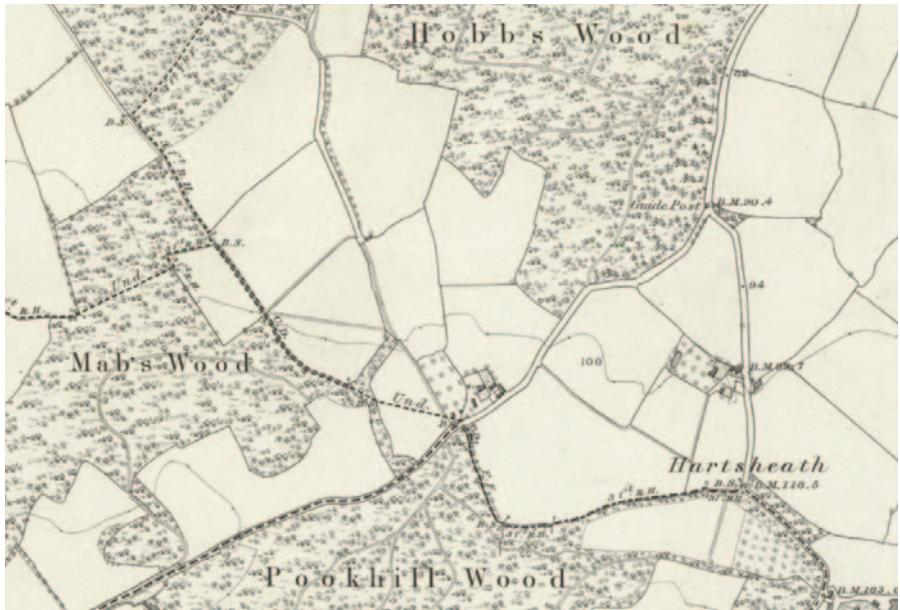


Fig. 1 OS Kent LXII, six-inch (1873). To the south-west of Staplehurst. Reproduced under a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-ShareAlike 4.0 International (CC-BY-NC-SA) licence with the permission of the National Library of Scotland.

The most exciting names, though, in supernatural terms, are the 'holes'. 'Hole' toponyms are frequently coupled with supernatural words to denote a bogey's lair: Fairy Hole, Hob Hole, Mermaid Hole, etc.<sup>40</sup> Sometimes 'hole' refers to caves, sometimes to hollows, sometimes to pools, and 'hole' names rarely denote ownership. The existence then of a Mabs Hole at Farlam in Cumberland suggests the supernatural lair of Mab on an isolated ruin site: a suggestive point in the landscape.<sup>41</sup> There is also a Mob's Hole at Ashton in Lancashire: a canal lock was named for it.<sup>42</sup> Then, in Lincolnshire, at Willoughby, there is a Mab's Hole in the woods, next to a stream known as Mabs Run.<sup>43</sup> Even more interesting are the Mob's Holes to the north of London: one in Essex, three in Hertfordshire.<sup>44</sup> It is inconceivable that the same owner's name was applied to a 'hole' in such a small territory four times.

Of course, none of this means that the Mab, say, who crawled out of a ruin in Farlam or the Eyesworth Mob in her hole in Hertfordshire or the Yorkshire Mab at her stile were the same Mab about which Shakespeare, Jonson and Drayton wrote. The British supernatural is local, with different meanings from region to region and from parish to parish.<sup>45</sup> However, these supernatural-sounding place names show that the word 'Mab' or 'Mob' had strong folklore connotations over certain parts of the country. But when?



Fig. 2 Mab place names.

The earliest recorded Mab place names date back to the 15th century; and the personal name was used at least three hundred years earlier.<sup>46</sup> But of the supernatural-sounding names above, only one (the stile) can be dated back as far as 1451.<sup>47</sup> The later names might, of course, date back to the times of Shakespeare, but they might equally have been coined in Georgian England.

## Mab as Witch in *Jacob and Esau*

In 2007, Jennifer Ailles opened up an interesting new avenue in Mab research when she claimed, 'Queen Mab is not a fairy; instead, she is a daemonic hag figure, one that has a precedent in the anonymous play *The Historie of Jacob and Esau*.'<sup>48</sup> The 'instead' is perhaps misplaced: an Elizabethan fairy and a demonic hag were not that far apart. Certainly they were on the same continuum.<sup>49</sup> But letting this pass, what of the idea that Mab was associated with hags and witchcraft and that she was referenced in *Jacob and Esau*?<sup>50</sup>

*The Historie of Jacob and Esau* is an obscure English play about the rivalry between the Biblical brothers Jacob and Esau. It was published in 1568 but was written perhaps in the 1550s.<sup>51</sup> The play is strongly protestant, and it is difficult to imagine it being performed under Mary (1554-8); does it date back to the time of Edward VI (1547-54)?<sup>52</sup> In the 'mab' scene,<sup>53</sup> Esau, tricked by Jacob, comes to the tent of the servants and roisters out three members of the household whom he blames for his misfortune. These are: Mido, 'a little Boy, leading Isaac'; Abra 'a little wench, servant to Rebecca'; and Deborra, 'the nurse of Isaacs Tente'. Deborra, note, is the only one of these three who has Biblical authority: 'Mido' and 'Abra' are invented names.

Esau, who is particularly petty in the scene, starts by demanding that the 'whores & theues' leave the tent. He then, as the figures emerge, fires off three insults: we have a 'whoreson ape' (Mido), a 'litle fende' (Abra) and a 'skittish Gill' (Abra: i.e. 'Jill', a 'familiar or contemptuous term applied to a woman', *OED*). Esau then turns his attention to Deborra, for whom he has his harshest words: 'come out thou mother Mab, out olde rotten witche./ As white as midnights arsehole, or virgin pitche'. This is the crucial sentence, but it will do to follow the insults through to their end for Esau has, then, a separate conversation with, in order, Mido, Abra and, finally, Deborra. Mido is a 'litle théefe'; Abra is a 'litle fiende' and a 'right deull' and 'thou Tib' (diminutive of Isobel); Deborra is an 'olde heg' and again a 'witche'.

The *OED* suggests that Mab here means a 'slattern; a woman of loose character': witchcraft and sexual immorality, like heresy and sexual deviance before them, merge effortlessly in early modern sources.<sup>54</sup> In fact, *Jacob and Essau* is given in the *OED* ('mab') as the first occurrence of this sense of 'Mab'. Ailles rejects the equation 'slut-mab' in *Jacob*, suggesting instead that Mab was a folklore 'hag midwife figure' known to those who would have watched the performance. 'It seems', she claims 'that the only [early] link between Mab and slatterns, or sluts, is the quotation that the *OED* gives from *Romeo and Juliet*: "That very Mab that ... bakes the Ellocks [or elf-locks] in foule sluttish haire."<sup>55</sup>

As it happens, in the course of the 16th and 17th centuries, 'Mab' evolves in a sluttish direction in the English language. Things start mildly. In *A myrrour or glasse for them that be syke* (1536; translation of a 1531 Dutch work), a character named Lazarus states: 'But I gae to much eare vnto these olde tothlesse mabbes, & pilergnawers [pillar-gnawers]'. This is a reference to religious overenthusiasm and stands as the first instance of 'mab' recorded in the language.<sup>56</sup> The translator is certainly referring to elderly women here; and in a context

that does not suggest sex or the supernatural. Almost a century later in *The arraignment of the whole creature* by Stephen Jerome (1632), we read, in a sexual context, that 'Even Mab, hath beene preferred before Madam', a low-class woman has been preferred to a high-class woman.<sup>57</sup> In 1658 on the front of a song tellingly called *The ranting whores resolution*, a tipsy man 'calls for his Mab, and his Mary'. The next year in *The court career death shaddow'd to life*, the narrator laments the destruction of all that is good in his world and includes in his list of woes: 'my old Mab fool'd into a Quaker'.<sup>58</sup> He is not talking about his wife ...

Of these four references, three refer to or at least shuffle around sex. Perhaps, we might guess, 'Mab' became a typical name for a lower-class woman – much, say, as 'Joe' refers today to a general member of the public in American ('Joe Public') and British English ('Joe Bloggs'). From there, to continue this hypothesis, 'Mab' began to attract unpleasant connotations: dirty, untidy, promiscuous ... If that is the case then 'mother Mab' in *Jacob and Esau* need be no more a reference to a folklore figure than 'Gill' (Jill) or 'Tib' (Isobel) in the same scene.<sup>59</sup> Rather, 'Mab' is a reference to an old lower-class woman, with Elizabethan associations: dirty, loose morals, slatternly.

The slut and slattern Mabs given above could have been influenced by folklore Mab or they could have influenced her development. The two can hardly be looked at in isolation. One example of this collision of the two roles appears in a late 17th-century revision of *King Lear* (1681). There Edgar playing Tom complains: 'Whilst Smug ply'd the Bellows/ She truckt with her Fellows,/ The Freckle-fac't Mab/ Was a Blouze and a Drab,/ Yet Swithin made Oberon jealous.'<sup>60</sup> 'Blouze' (a beggar's woman) and 'Drab' (a slut or slattern) are both instructive here and are applied, rather jarringly, to Mab the fairy queen. These words put Drayton's amorous Mab in a slightly different light. As Ailles notes, the 'foule sluttish haire's' in Shakespeare might also be worth revisiting.

### **'The Book of Mab'**

On Sunday, 25 August 1601, a member of the Lincolnshire gentry, Talboys Dymoke, put on a play entitled *The Death of the Lord of Kyme* as part of the celebrations for the ending of the summer at South Kyme; about thirty miles, note, from Mab's Hole at Willoughby (see above). The stage was a green with a maypole, and a crowd of between a hundred and four hundred watched. The play itself does not survive: we only know about this performance because it became subject to legal review. Henry Clinton, Earl of Lincolnshire, made (almost certainly correctly) complaint that he had been mocked in the play. The case was reviewed in the Star Chamber with witness statements being taken in the early months of 1602.<sup>61</sup>

The play, we learn from these records, had a strange coda, where the name 'Mab' occurred. A mock minister (a local named Craddock), drinking beer, mounted a pulpit and offered a prayer for the dead lord of Kyme and then, after reading from 'the Book of Heretoclites', gave a tripartite sermon. The questions in the Star Chamber centred particularly on the sermon because not only had the Earl of Lincolnshire claimed that he



had been insulted, he also claimed that the play was irreligious, and in that respect the finale in the pulpit was by far the worst part of the proceedings.<sup>62</sup>

Four witnesses mention a 'book of Mab' here: one claimed that the minister 'reade a text out of the book of Mabb';<sup>63</sup> another that the text of the sermon was said by Craddock to be 'owt of the heteroclitcs or the booke of mabb'.<sup>64</sup> Talboys Dymoke stated, instead, that Craddock had claimed that a tale he read was from 'the booke of Mabb';<sup>65</sup> Craddock finally insisted that he 'did not say that his Text was taken owt of the booke of Mabb', presumably in answer to a direct question.<sup>66</sup> The easiest explanation, surely, involves no folklore. 'Mab', as we have seen, was perhaps used in the 16th and certainly in the 17th centuries as a reference to a woman of ill repute. The play had made much of the 'loose women of London and Lincolnshire' and one of the characters was called 'Lord Pleasure-her'.<sup>67</sup> In a conventional Anglican sermon the preacher took his inspiration from a line of scripture in, say, to choose a name that may have provided a jingle in 1601, the Book of Moab. There was then a kind of outrageous sense in claiming that the lesson, in a mock sermon, came from the Book of Whore. It would explain the sharp questioning and Craddock's denials on this point.

However, there are detailed accounts of the sermon, which show that there is more to Mab.<sup>68</sup> The paper book from which Craddock read seems to have been broken down into three parts, mimicking the Elizabethan sermon. The first part was about Bayardes leape on Ancaster Heath (the story survived to be recorded in the 1860s, having gone through who knows what iterations);<sup>69</sup> the second was, according to Craddock, about the Bolders stone in Bullingbrooke ferme [Bollingbroke farm?] and according to Dymoke an 'auncient storie of Mabb'; the third was 'the more knaves the honester men' and more specifically the (well-known) story of 'the friar and the boye'.<sup>70</sup> One Richard Hitchcock stated that an earlier mock sermon by Dymoke, given some months before – 'A fabulous matter in form of A Sermon' – had been much like that on Kyme Greene: 'they were both of the storye of Mabb and of Ancaster heath and of old Gedney ...'.<sup>71</sup>

As to Mab we clearly go beyond a local woman named Mabel or the generic sense of slattern or slut with this text. Two witnesses report 'an auncient storie of Mabb'. Given Dymoke's and Craddock's descriptions I can only assume that the Bolders stone story was about Mabb, though I have found no other reference to this place. Craddock avoided references to Mab; Dymoke downplayed them: we have more material than we would have otherwise had because they resorted to different strategies when interrogated. 'Mabb' clearly meant something in southern Lincolnshire. The lack of explanatory text and the keenness of the questions may mean that it was also understood in the Star Chamber in London.

### **'Mab-Led'**

In *Hamlet* Hecuba is described as a 'mobled queen', a phrase that delights Polonius.<sup>72</sup> In 1778 George Steevens, in one of his editions of Shakespeare, offered the following note on this word: 'I am informed that mab-led, in Warwickshire (where it is pronounced mob-led)

signifies led astray by a will o' the wisp, an *ignis fatuus*.<sup>73</sup> This note does not appear in Steevens' edition of 1773 and so this information had perhaps reached Steevens in the mid-1770s.<sup>74</sup>

It must first be said that the word 'mab-led' connected to the *ignis fatuus* is credible, particularly in the context of the English of southern England and Wales.<sup>75</sup> We have in the south-west of England 'piskey-led' or 'pixie-led';<sup>76</sup> 'piskon-led' in Pembrokeshire;<sup>77</sup> 'Poake-ledden' in Worcestershire, Shropshire and Gloucestershire;<sup>78</sup> the unusual 'pout-ledden' in Herefordshire;<sup>79</sup> and the Norfolk form 'led willed'<sup>80</sup> (see also the possible Scots form 'fairy-led').<sup>81</sup> These all refer to travellers, especially night-time travellers, getting misdirected by supernatural forces, frequently in the form of a light.

I can't resist referring here to Jonson and Drayton, despite my earlier resolutions to avoid these writers. First Jonson talks of Mab and the midwife. After the birth of the fairy child, Mab 'then leads [the midwife] from her burrows,/ Home through ponds and water-furrows'.<sup>82</sup> In British fairy-lore fairy disorientation often ends with the victim getting dunked in a ditch or a pond and the fairies laughing.<sup>83</sup> There is no laughter in Jonson, but in Drayton's *Nymphadia* Puck is mazed by Mab's magic; the misleader is misled. Puck stumbles on a trunk then falls 'into a ditch of mud' and Queen Mab 'well-near cracked her spleen/ with very extreme laughter'.<sup>84</sup>

Allies wrote in 1840 of a field named Mobbled Pleck in Herefordshire, 'meaning ... a plot where any one was liable to be Mab-led'.<sup>85</sup> I know of no other 'led' place names: though there are sites with supernatural place names where one might be expect to become disoriented.<sup>86</sup> In 1895, the Rev. A.R. Winnington-Ingram remembered, with reference apparently to Gloucestershire, that 'I have myself heard country people say of a man who was stupefied that he was Mambled or Mombled, clearly from Mab-led'.<sup>87</sup> Winnington-Ingram was apparently getting mombled confused with 'momme': 'to jumble together; to ravel, tangle ... to confuse, to puzzle, to wander mentally'.<sup>88</sup> Mab-led is reported as being obsolete at the end of the 19th century by Joseph Wright in his *English Dialect Dictionary*: his references all return to Steevens.<sup>89</sup> Is it possible that 'mobled' in *Hamlet* is actually Shakespeare using Mab-led or, according to its Warwickshire pronunciation, Mob-led, as Steevens implies?<sup>90</sup> 'The mobled queen' marks the first use in the longer *OED* of 'mobled' (one 'b') meaning 'veiled' or with a 'muffled head', and the word appears, according to the *OED*, three times in the 17th century with just this sense.<sup>91</sup> The word would also fit with the word 'mob' or 'mab', meaning a woman's indoor hat.<sup>92</sup> The word in the play seems to be marked down as obscure by Hamlet's reaction 'The mobled queen?'<sup>93</sup> But some relation to head-gear is perhaps suggested by the following lines where the player announces that Hecuba has a cloth on her head: 'a clout upon that head/Where late the diadem stood'.

In the end, all supporting data for the word 'mab-led' is rather weak save for Steevens' original comment. The existence of 'mab-led' comes down to an assessment of the sentence in Steevens' note and an assessment of his source. On the one hand, we have an absolutely credible form, in a part of the country where such terms were common (see Fig. 3). Indeed,

it is difficult to imagine what else the word 'mab-led' or 'mob-led' could have meant. I am also struck by the fact that the informant apparently associated 'mob' (the pronunciation) with 'Mab' (the supernatural being): something entirely beside the point in terms of *Hamlet* criticism. On the other hand, we may have had some wishful thinking on the part of a Warwickshire informant who wanted to explain an obscure word in *Hamlet*: Shakespeare was, of course, from that county. If Steevens was tricked the invention was a remarkably convincing one.



Fig. 3 Led Words.

## Conclusion

However we judge the shadowy Mab who frisks through our sources, one thing should be clear: she was well known. The idea that Shakespeare invented Mab on a whim is for the birds. The Mab's and Mob's Holes suggest the existence of a folklore character, something also hinted at by an 18th-century Warwickshire phrase 'Mob-led'. None of the evidence for these forms dates back to the 16th century. But when combined with the mock sermon from Lincolnshire and 'an auncient storie of Mabb', the evidence triangulates.<sup>94</sup> There can be no question that some Tudors knew of Mab. It is possible that the insult in *Jacob and Esau* also depended on this figure.

What part of Britain was Mab associated with? On the evidence of the Star Chamber witness accounts, Mab was known in the southern part of Lincolnshire in 1601. It seems – on the basis of 'mob-led' – that Mab was also known in Warwickshire at some point in the modern period (the home county of Drayton and Shakespeare). There are to the north of London the Mob's Holes names. There are the Mab and Mob Holes in the north-west and Lincolnshire. There appears to be no very convincing evidence for Mab to the south of the Thames or to the south of the Severn (though see Fig. 1). What, if anything, can now be said about this Mab who appears so tantalisingly in these non-literary sources? She was not a ghost: if she had been a ghost then she would have been limited to one area, and a small one at that. Nor was she a pseudo-historical figure: a King Arthur or a Robin Hood. Arthur and Robin (at least in the ballads and stories that have come down to us) are hardly likely to lead someone around in the marshes and laugh when their victims fall in the water (mab-led etc).<sup>95</sup> Mab seems to belong to what could very broadly be called the fairy world. 'Fairy' in folklore studies generally means one of two things. First, it can mean what Yeats called 'the trooping fairies', i.e. a society of fairies usually seen together dancing, hunting, fighting etc. Second the word 'fairy' can be applied more broadly to all solitary non-diabolical, non-undead supernatural beings, including shape-changers, phantom dogs, will-o'-the-wisps, Puck and Hob.

Mab is associated with wild places (think of the Lincolnshire story and the toponyms); she is also perhaps something of a trickster as the word 'mab-led' suggests. What can the literary sources add to this picture? We seem to have a slightly different vision of Mab there. The Mab found in the poems and plays is very much a fairy in the social sense: she is part of a supernatural community that mirrors the society of her human neighbours. Shakespeare says that she is 'Queen Mab', though he does not say 'Queen of the Fairies'.<sup>96</sup> In Jonson and Drayton she is to be found in the company of a fairy court with servants and (in Drayton) a fairy husband. Was her fairy royalty a literary gloss ennobling a solitary folklore figure? Or was she, in folklore, a fairy queen, but one that stood apart from her underlings and so shared some of the

characteristics of the solitary fairies? Our folklore sources do not allow us to answer these questions with any confidence. That Mab was a genuine folklore figure should, though, on the basis of the evidence given above, no longer be in question.

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## Simon Young

### Notes

1. William Shakespeare, *Romeo and Juliet* (1, 4). Thanks to Sarah Allison, Peter Burger, Verena Demoed, Katrien Depuydt, Davide Ermacora, Richard Green, Jeremy Harte and Chris Woodyard for help with points in this paper.
2. [Ben Jonson], *A Particular Entertainment of the Queene and Prince their Highness to Althrope, at the Right Honourable the Lord Spencers, on Saturday being the 25 June 1603 as they came first into the Kingdome* (n.p., n.d.).
3. Michael Drayton, *The barons' wars, Nymphidia, and other poems* (London: Routledge, 1887), 193-215.
4. John Milton, *John Milton's L'allegro: Il Penseroso, Comus, and Lycidas*, ed. George Rice Carpenter (New York: Longmans, 1895), 8.
5. Tom Cain and Ruth Connolly, *The Complete Poetry of Robert Herrick* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 2 vols, vol. I, 190 for 'The Fairies'.
6. The best list is W.P. Reeves, 'Shakespeare's Queen Mab', *Modern Language Notes* 17 (1902): 20, though the list could be multiplied many times over.
7. Shakespeare, *Romeo and Juliet* (1, 4).
8. Jennifer Louise Ailles, 'The Fairy/Queen/Mab: Mediating Elizabeth in Early Modern England' (doctoral thesis, University of Rochester, 2007), 76-119; Sarah Allison, 'Mab in English Folklore' (12 July 2020), <https://writinginmargins.weebly.com/home/mab-in-english-folklore> (accessed 9 August 2021); Harry Keil, 'Scabies and the Queen Mab Passage in *Romeo and Juliet*', *Journal of the History of Ideas* 18 (1957): 406-10.
9. Burton Raffel in William Shakespeare, *Romeo and Juliet*, ed. Burton Raffel (London: Yale University Press, 2004), 38.
10. Harold Jenkins in William Shakespeare, *Hamlet*, ed. Harold Jenkins (London: Routledge, 1982), 23.
11. There is little secondary literature on this topic. By far the most useful for this paper has been Ailles, 'The Fairy/Queen/Mab' (a doctoral thesis) and Allison, 'Mab in English Folklore' (a blogpost). See also William Thoms, *Three Notelets on Shakespeare* (London: John Russell Smith, 1865), 92-108; and Reeves, 'Shakespeare's Queen'.
12. C.J. Arnold, *Roman Britain to Saxon England: An Archaeological Study* (London: Croom Helm, 1984), 9-10.
13. Allison, 'Mab in English Folklore'.
14. Thoms, *Three Notelets*, 107; Wirt Sikes, *British goblins: Welsh folk-lore, fairy mythology, legends and traditions* (London: Sampson, 1880), 14.
15. Thoms, *Three Notelets*, 106-7; Reeves, 'Shakespeare's Queen', 22-5.
16. Thoms, *Three Notelets*, 101-6; favoured by Thomas Keightley, *The Fairy Mythology* (London: H.G. Bohn, 1850), 331 and Gillian Edwards, *Hobgoblin and Sweet Puck: Fairy Names and Natures* (London: Geoffrey Bles, 1974), 174-5. For the only English citation: Thomas Heywood, *The hierarchie of the blessed angells Their names, orders and offices the fall of Lucifer with his angells* (London: Printed by Adam Islip, 1635), 507. Abonde is unquestionably an interesting figure (Carlo Ginzburg, *Storia Notturna: Una decifrazione del sabbia* (Turin: Einaudi, 1998), 76-83): she may even be tied to Mab in functional terms, but it is difficult and (given the arguments marshalled in my main text) unnecessary to make the case for any onomastic link between Mab and Abonde.
17. Thoms, *Three Notelets*, 106-7; e.g. Cedric Watts in William Shakespeare, *Romeo and Juliet*, ed. Cedric Watts (London: Wordsworth Press, 1992), 130.
18. K.M. Briggs, *A Dictionary of Fairies* (London: Routledge, 2003 [1976]), 275; compare her earlier *The Anatomy of Puck: An Examination of Fairy Beliefs among Shakespeare's Contemporaries and Successors* (London: Routledge, 1959), 47: 'Her name is more native than Titania's'.
19. Brian Cooper, 'Lexical reflections inspired by Slavonic \*bog: English bogey from a Slavonic root?', *Transactions of the Philological Society* 103 (2005): 92-3. English 'fairy' perhaps made its way into Welsh: W.V.J. Gruffydd, *Folklore and Myth in the Mabinogion* (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 1958), 6-7; see also *coblyn* (recorded from 1547 in Welsh in the *Geiriadur Prifysgol Cymru*) from Eng. goblin (*OED* records earliest attestation in the 1300s).

20. Patrick Sims-Williams, 'The visionary Celt: the construction of an 'ethnic preconception'', *Cambridge Medieval Celtic Studies* 11 (1986): 71-96.
21. Drayton, *The Baron's Wars*, 198.
22. *Robin Good-Fellow, his mad pranks and merry jests* (London, 1639), unnumbered but 37-8.
23. Simon Young, 'Mob, Dob, Lob and Bobbitt: Supernatural Personal Names and Supernatural Place-names' (under review).
24. Emma Wilby, *Cunning Folk and Familiar Spirits: Shamanistic Visionary Traditions in Early Modern British Witchcraft and Magic* (Brighton: Sussex Academic Press, 2005), 63-4.
25. For several examples from the East Riding, see John Nicholson, *Folk Lore of East Yorkshire* (London: Simpkin, Marshall & Co., 1890), 28, 52, 68, 79, 80.
26. Elizabeth Mary Wright, *Rustic Speech and Folk-lore* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1918), 339-41.
27. Patrick Hanks, Richard Coates and Peter McClure, *The Oxford Dictionary of Family Names in Britain and Ireland* (Oxford: OUP, 2016), 3 vols, vol. II, 1652-3, under the voces Mabb and Mable (see also Mabin).
28. Bruce Dickens, 'Yorkshire Hobs', *Transaction of the Yorkshire Dialect Society* 7 (1942), 9-23.
29. Jabez Allies, *On the ancient British, Roman and Saxon Antiquities and Folk-lore of Worcestershire* (London: Smith, 1856), 437.
30. James Rattue, *The Living Stream: Holy Wells in Historical Context* (Woodbridge: Boydell Press, 1995), 41.
31. 'Mob' is a variant of 'Mab', apparently: Hanks, Coates and McClure, *The Oxford Dictionary of Family Names*, II, 1859.
32. Carole Hough, 'Women in place-names', *Perceptions of Place: Twenty-First-Century Interpretations of English Place-Name Studies*, ed. J. Carroll and D.N. Parsons (Nottingham: English Place Name Society, 2013), 251-2; Keith Briggs, who has made a special study of personal names in place names, suggests, in an email, 27 April 2021, that 'about 4.5% of personal names' were female.
33. Hanks, Coates and McClure, *The Oxford Dictionary of Family Names*, II, 1652.
34. Mabb's Farm, OS Sussex 28 (1878); Mabb's Farm, OSSus 44 (1878)
35. For more straightforward examples: Keith Briggs, 'OE and ME cunte in place-names', *Journal of the English Place-Name Society* 41 (2009): 28-9; 'Finkle', note, seems to be irrelevant to this question in Richard Coates, 'A breath of fresh air through Finkle Street', *Nomina* 18 (1995): 7-36.
36. This is taken from Paul Cullen, 'The Vocabulary of English Place-Names, draft M entries', <https://www.academia.edu/4062761>.
37. For Mab Well, see Rattue, *The Living Stream*, 41; Mobwell is at Missenden; and for fairy wells, Jeremy Harte, "'A Fairy or Else an Insect!': Traditions at Fairy Wells', *Gramarye* 16 (2019): 55-9.
38. Drayton, *The Baron's Wars*, 202 ff.
39. A.H. Smith, *The Place-Names of the West Riding of Yorkshire* (Cambridge: CUP, 1961-3), 8 vols, vol. I, 282; for stiles, see Barbara Spooner, 'The Haunted Style', *Folklore* 79 (1968): 135-9.
40. Simon Young, 'Beware Bobbitt! A Forgotten Essex Bogy', *Tradition Today* (forthcoming).
41. A. Armstrong, A. Mawer, F.M. Stenton and Bruce Dickens, *The Place-Names of Cumberland* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1950-2), 3 vols, vol. I, 90. I presume this is the site at Farlam: 'They call the ruin (Bastle) Mabs Hole as they have a family story of a witch/ hermit who lived there', <http://www.gatehouse-gazetteer.info/English%20sites/701.html> (accessed 17 Jul 2021).
42. 'A Boatman Drowned', *Hyde and Glossop Weekly News* (18 September 1869), 3.
43. OSLi 75SE (1888).
44. 'Ashwell', *Cambridge Chronicle* (30 April 1842), 3 (Ashwell); 'Darley Wood', *Luton Times* (22 April 1876), 4 (Breachwood Green); John Cary, *Carys actual survey of the country fifteen miles round London, Wherein the roads, rivers, woods and common...* (London: printed for Cary, 1817), 17, 'Mobs or Bobs Hole' (Chipping Barnet); 'A very desirable...', *Oracle and the Daily Advertiser* (30 October 1806), 4 (Wanstead).
45. We talk of 'characters' or 'figures' in British folklore, but it might be more useful to think of 'presences' who share some general characteristics, but who also differ in many respects. Given the proclivity of English folklore tradition for short female names for bogies, we could also be seeing polygenesis.
46. Smith, *Place-Names of the West Riding*, vol. IV, 126 for Mabs Gate in Leeds (1487).
47. Smith, *Place-Names of the West Riding*, vol. I, 282.
48. Ailles, 'The Fairy/Queen/Mab', viii.
49. Richard Green, *Elf Queens and Holy Friars: Fairy Beliefs and the Medieval Church* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania, 2016), 194-205; and thinking specifically of Mab I cannot resist quoting Martin Lluelyn, *Memiracles with other poems on several subjects* (London: Peter Parker, 1679), 36: 'Queene Mab comes worse

- than a Witch in:/ Backe and Sides she entailes/ To the Print of her Nailles' for a misbehaving maid. Inspired perhaps by Robert Baron, *An apologie for Paris for rejecting of Juno and Pallas, and presenting of Ate's golden ball to Venus with a discussion of the reasons that might induce him to favour either of the three: occasioned by a private discourse, wherein the Trojans judgment was carpated at by some and defended* (London: Th. Dring, 1649), 82: 'like the/ tyrannous Fairy that entailes the sides/ of Tell-tales to the print of her nailles.'
50. I am unconvinced by Ailles' claim, in 'The Fairy/Queen/Mab', 80-1 (taken up by Allison, 'Mab in English Folklore') that Mab is, on the basis of *Jacob and Esau*, a midwife: she is associated with Deborra, a nurse. There is no question that midwives had supernatural associations in the early modern period, see E. Allemang, 'The Midwife-Witch on Trial: Historical Fact or Myth?', *Canadian Journal of Midwifery Research and Practice* 9 (2010), 10-20. But the only 'proof' that Deborra was a midwife is that she saw Esau and Jacob being born. Had the author wanted to make Deborra a midwife they could have given much stronger signals in the text.
  51. *A newe mery and wittie comedie or enterlude, newly imprinted, treating vpon the historie of Iacob and Esau taken out of the xxvij. chap. of the first booke of Moses entituled Genesis* (London: Henrie Bynneman, 1568).
  52. Of course, in terms of Tudor dynastic politics Jacob, the younger brother who inherits, could be a nod to Elizabeth.
  53. (5, 6).
  54. E.g. Walter Stephens, *Demon lovers: witchcraft, sex and the crisis of belief* (London: University of Chicago Press, 2002).
  55. Ailles, 'The Fairy/Queen/Mab', 41.
  56. Gulielmus Gnaphaeus, *A myrrour or glasse for them that be syke [and] in payne* (Southwarke: Iames Nicolson, 1536). The original Dutch – this was an English translation of Gnapheus's *Een troost ende spiegel der siecken* – was 'maer ic geloofde dese olde wijuen, dese matsleypsters ende pylarenbijters al te vele', in Samuel Cramer and Fredrik Pijper, *Bibliotheca reformatoria neerlandica: Geschriften uit den tijd der hervorming in de Nederlanden: Polemische geschriften der Hervormingsgezinden* (Hague: n.p., 1903): 'But I believed these old wives, these hypocrites and pillar-gnawers overly', with reference to excessive religious enthusiasm.
  57. Stephen Jerome, *The arraignment of the whole creature, at the barre of religion, reason, and experience. Occasioned vpon an inditement preferred by the soule of man against the prodigals vanity and vaine prodigality. Explained, applyed, and tryed in the historie and misterie of that parable. From whence is drawne this doome orthodoxall, and iudgement diuine. That no earthly vanity can satisfie mans heavenly soule* (London: B. Alsop and Tho. Fawcett, 1631), 226.
  58. *The court career death shadow'd to life. Or Shadowes of life and death. A pasquil dialogue seriously perused and highly approved by the clearest judgments* (London: n.p., 1659), 14.
  59. For Tib as a witch's familiar: James Crossley (ed.), *Potts' Discovery of Witches In the County of Lancaster* (Manchester: Chetham Society, 1845), 3, in separately paginated notes.
  60. Nahum Tate and William Shakespeare, *The history of King Lear acted at the Duke's theatre* (London: Printed for E. Flesher, 1681), 34 (Act III).
  61. Martin Wiggins with Catherine Richardson, *British Drama, 1533-1642: 1598-1602* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), 310; see also Norreys Jephson O'Conor, *Godes Peace and the Queenes: Vicissitudes of a House, 1539-1615* (London: Oxford University Press, 1934), 109-26.
  62. O'Conor, *Godes Peace and the Queenes*, 125.
  63. O'Conor, *Godes Peace and the Queenes*, 118.
  64. O'Conor, *Godes Peace and the Queenes*, 120.
  65. O'Conor, *Godes Peace and the Queenes*, 120.
  66. O'Conor, *Godes Peace and the Queenes*, 119.
  67. O'Conor, *Godes Peace and the Queenes*, 115 for loose women.
  68. Craddock admitted (O'Conor, *Godes Peace and the Queenes*, 120) that he 'did then utter some other wordes which he doth not now remember. He ... did read a text which he saide was taken owt of the 22 chapter of the booke of Hitroclites, which text was, "Cesar Dando, subliuando, ignoscendo gloriam adeptus est"; and the same he ... diuided into three partes, viz., the first, Bayardes leape on Ancaster heath; the second, the Bolders stone in Bulling-brooke ferme; and the third, the more Knaves the honeste Men. And at the same tyme also he ... in merrie termes made mention of Mr Gedney of Ancaster: Talboys Dymoke (*ibid.*), described the mock sermon in similar terms. Craddock 'reade a text which he saide was taken out of the Hytroclites ... viz., "Cesar Dando, subleuando, ignoscendo gloriam adeptus est," and did englishe it thus, "Bayardes leape of Ancaster hathe[,] the Bownder stone in Bollingbrookes ferme. I say the more Knaves the honeste Men". And the ... person then deuided his texte into three partes, viz., the first, a colladacion [collation?] of the

- ancient plaine of Ancaster heathe; the second, an ancient storie of Mabb as an appendix, and the third, concludinge, Knaves honest men, by an ancient story of the friar and the boye. And also at the same time the ... person told a Tale of Bayardes leape which he said was taken owt of the booke of Mabb, and then willed the people to goe to one Mr Gedney of Ancaster and he would tell it better.'
69. Edward Trollope, 'Lincoln Heath and Its Historical Associations', *The Reliquary* 4 (1863-4): 3-9: 'a fearful contest on the Heath with a witch'.
  70. Thomas Wright, *The Tale of the Basyn and The Frere and the Boy: Two Early Tales of Magic* (London: William Pickering, 1836), unnumbered.
  71. O'Connor, *Godes Peace and the Queenes*, 122.
  72. (2, 2).
  73. William Shakespeare, *The plays of William Shakespeare. In ten volumes. With the corrections and illustrations of various commentators; to which are added notes by Samuel Johnson and George Steevens* (London: C. Bathurst, 1778), 10 vols, vol. X, 265.
  74. William Shakespeare, *The plays of William Shakespeare. In ten volumes. With the corrections and illustrations of various commentators; to which are added notes by Samuel Johnson and George Steevens* (London: C. Bathurst, 1773), 10 vols, vol. X, 226. This phrase is not, as is often claimed, the work of Henry Ellis or John Brand: Steevens' sentence appeared in Ellis' 1813 edition of Brand with an unclear reference back to Steevens: John Brand and Henry Ellis, *Observations on popular antiquities, chiefly illustrating the origin of our vulgar customs, ceremonies and superstitions* (London: Rivington, 1813), 2 vols, vol. II, 694.
  75. I wonder whether it was, in fact, 'Mab-Ledden' and Steevens or his informant 'normalised' the word?
  76. Simon Young, 'Pixy-Led in Devon and the South-West', *Transactions of the Devonshire Association* 148 (2016), 311-36 and related forms.
  77. W.P. Merrick and M.S. Clark, 'Pembrokeshire Notes', *Folklore* (1904) 15: 196; to be read with J.P. Owen, 'Piscon-Led', *Notes and Queries* 7 (1907: 10th series): 226-7.
  78. Allies, *Antiquities and Folk-lore of Worcestershire*, 418; Joseph Wright, *The English Dialect Dictionary* (London: Frowde, 1898-1905), 6 vols, vol. IV, 635.
  79. Wright, *English Dialect Dictionary*, vol. IV, 603.
  80. Edwards, *Fairy Names and Natures*, 202-3; i.e. led by a Will-o-the-Wisp.
  81. James Ballantine, *One hundred songs* (Glasgow: John S. Marr, 1866), 15, or is this literary?
  82. [Jonson], *A Particular Entertainment*.
  83. Young, 'Pixy-Led in Devon and the South-West', 314; Simon Young, 'Four Neglected Pixy-Led Sources from Devon', *The Devon Historian* 85 (2016): 43.
  84. Drayton, *The Baron's Wars*, 207.
  85. Allies, *Antiquities and Folk-lore of Worcestershire*, 437.
  86. Eg. for Piskey or Pixy Hill, see Joseph Hammond, *A Cornish Parish Being An Account of St Austell, Town, Church, District and People* (London: Skeffington and Son, 1897), 360 n. 2.
  87. Rev. A.R. Winnington-Ingram, 'On the Origin of Names of Places with special reference to Gloucestershire, its Folk-lore and Traditions; and a short account of thirteen Parishes in Gloucestershire by way of illustration', *Proceedings of the Cotteswold Naturalists' Field Club* 11 (1895): 28.
  88. Wright, *English Dialect Dictionary*, IV, 148.
  89. Wright, *English Dialect Dictionary*, IV, 1.
  90. The word is written 'mobled' in the first and second quarto: Shakespeare, *Hamlet*, ed. Jenkins, 267.
  91. Allison, 'Mab in English Folklore'.
  92. OED 'Mob-Cap', earliest attestation late 18th century.
  93. Though note, Shakespeare, *Hamlet*, ed. Jenkins, 267: 'it is not clear that Hamlet is questioning and not savouring the phrase'.
  94. I won't insult the reader's intelligence by suggesting that the Lincolnshire Mab (with her ancient story) was a folklore figure inspired by *Romeo and Juliet*, first put on less than a decade before in London...
  95. The closest to this ideal is perhaps the wilderness Brittonic Arthur: see O.J. Padel, 'The nature of Arthur', *Cambrian Medieval Celtic Studies* 27 (1994): 1-31.
  96. There was an attempt, even in the 19th century, to take 'queen' in the speech as 'woman' (or even 'strumpet'): Keightley, *The Fairy Mythology*, 331. This leeches through into modern commentaries: e.g. Shakespeare, *Romeo and Juliet*, ed. Watts (1992), 130: "'Queen" may pun on "quean" slut ... and the noun "mab" could also mean slut'. All will have depended on the emphasis that 'Mercutio' was told to give to that word.